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NOVEL

5

REINCARNATED AS A
DRAGON
HATCHLING





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Seven Seas Entertainment

HARUNAE DESERT

ILLUSIA

A hero that's said to only appear once every 500 years.

ADOFF

A former Knight Commander. Currently in prison.

NINA

Catgirl demi-human (Felis-human). Our hero encounters her while traveling.

BALLRABBIT

A monster our hero meets in the desert. Greedy with a big appetite.

NOAH'S FOREST

MELTIA

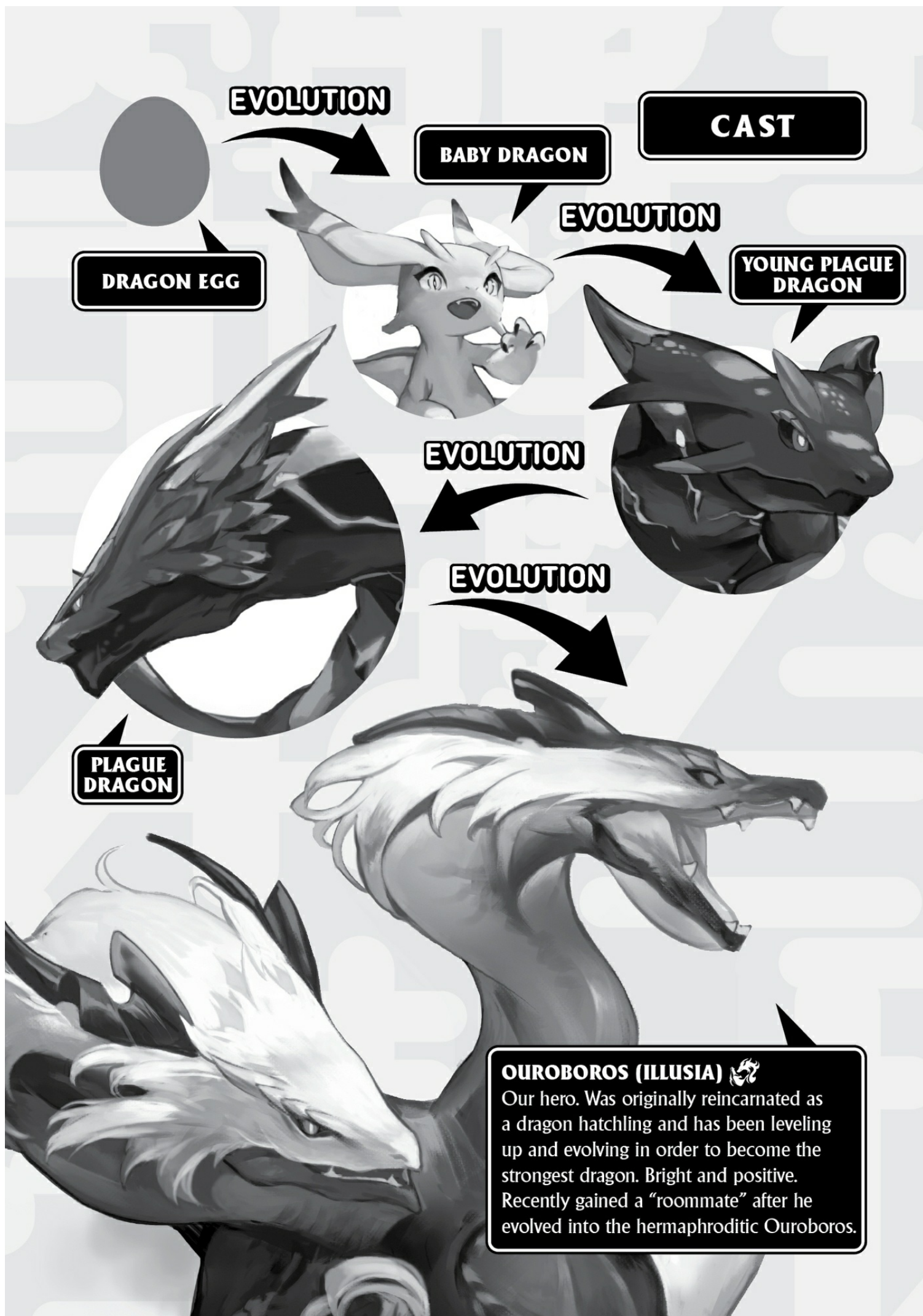
A swordswoman from the Royal Capital. Brought Myria along on her journey after the two met in the village.

MYRIA

A kindhearted girl who named our hero. Traveling with Meltia after meeting her in the village.

BLACK LIZARD

A trusted companion of our hero. Master of poison attacks.



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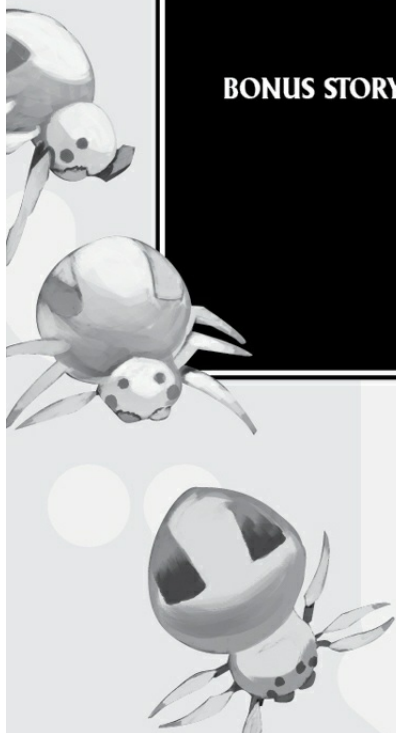
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Afterword.....



THE STORY SO FAR

After
rescuing the slave
girl, Nina, our hero the Plague
Dragon Illusia and Ballrabbit travel
through the desert toward a country where
she can live safely. On the way, they are attacked by
a human. Illusia manages to tell him he doesn't want to
fight, and the man, Adoff, stops and says, "Sorry, Illusia, but
please put down your sword." Hearing his own name, our hero is
confused—until he sees a man appear, riding on a white-winged horse.

The young man approaches our hero with a friendly smile on his
face—but then suddenly turns hostile, refusing to put down his sword. He
attacks our hero, and then Adoff when he tries to stop him too. Our hero
struggles to protect a terrified Nina. Seeing this, the man tells our hero to
meet him in Harunae in four days' time if he wants to save Nina's life.

According to Adoff, the man is a hero also named Illusia, and, four days later, he
would execute Nina by framing her for a crime she hadn't committed.

Our dragon hero knows he must save Nina, but his stats are not high enough
to take on the human hero. "If I can't beat him yet, then I've got four days to
become stronger," he decides, embarking on an epic quest to level up quickly.
Finally, he evolves into a rank A Ouroboros and heads toward Harunae
with Adoff and Ballrabbit to rescue Nina. The human hero deploys
cowardly tactics like using human shields, but he stands no chance
against an Ouroboros. Adoff finally finishes him off.

From there, our hero escorts Nina and Ballrabbit
to the kingdom of Ardesia, a safe haven for
demi-humans, before setting off on
a new journey...

Tensei Sitara Dragon no Tamago datta-
Saikyo Igai Mezasane Volume 5
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Chapter 1:

A New Land

Part 1

I NARROWED MY EYES against the wind. A light breeze would have been more than welcome—might have cooled my scales and wings, even—but instead I faced strong gusts that dried out my eyes. I just couldn't adjust. That said, flying this high up in the air had its perks: For one thing, it really cleared my mind, and there was no way I could've experienced anything like it back in my old life. Thanks to the boosts my Ouroboros evolution gave to my Fly skill and stamina, the flight was smooth sailing too. I felt like I could fly forever.

My new roomie-slash-partner seemed to agree with me. They swiveled their head around happily as they surveyed the landscape below. It felt strangely comforting to see them so content. Did I mention my partner was a second head sprouting out of my own Ouroboros body?

I'd defeated the hero in Harunae and, with Adoff's help, successfully delivered Nina and Ballrabbit to Ardesia. Since then I'd been flying toward the east. According to Adoff, if I kept going in this direction I'd come to a big forest that he thought I would find pretty comfortable.

I followed my other head's gaze down to a large river with vegetation growing here and there along its shore. It flowed all the way to the ocean, while an enormous forest sprawled upstream.

That must be the forest Adoff spoke so much about...the place where so many heroes lost their lives. A dangerous tribe called the Lithovars supposedly lived there. They sounded scary, but I was hardly drowning in places where I could stay. Beggars couldn't be choosers.

Besides, I was a big, tough Ouroboros now. It'd take way more than some scary humans to kill me! Worst case scenario, I could get up and fly away. This place couldn't be *too* bad, anyway. It came recommended by Adoff himself.

I looked down at the river that met the ocean and wondered if it might be the same one that ran through the chasm where I fought the slime. It would explain why I'd washed out to sea. I didn't see any Lithovars in that forest, though, nor

any super dangerous monsters. Still, I'd yet to see any other place that looked this much like my forest. Would I run into the black lizard or the orangurangs there? Never mind that question. I hadn't solved the problem of my Dragon Scale Powder curse yet. Moreover, if the neighboring villagers ever got wind of the two-headed dragon lurking nearby, it could cause more than a little chaos.

Even if this forest did connect to my old hangout spot, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. If I went upstream without a plan, I might never run into my old buddies at all. Maybe I should wait until I evolved into something a bit more suitable before heading upstream? It wasn't like I was even confident I could find my way through this place.

My last set of evolution options seemed like a list of final boss types, including the Ouroboros. I hoped the weird skill I got from defeating the hero—Human Realm Path—would have some good influence on my evolution options from here on out. It was *his* skill, though, which gave me pause. He was meant to be a hero, right? Before everything went wrong? Maybe this skill would open up some hero-like pathway for me. I decided to check my status again.

Illusia

Species: Ouroboros

Status: Normal

Lv: 60/125

HP: 1536/1536

MP: 1494/1494

Attack: 642

Defense: 438

Magic: 698

Agility: 486

Rank: A

Sacred Skills:

Human Realm Path: Lv —

Special Skills:

Dragon Scale: Lv 7

Divine Voice: Lv 5

Grecian Language: Lv 3

Fly: Lv 7

Dragon Scale Powder: Lv 7

Dark Type: Lv —

Wicked Dragon: Lv — Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 8

Psychic Sense: Lv 5

Automatic MP Recovery: Lv 6

Twin Heads: Lv —

Split Personality: Lv —

Mutual Understanding: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 5

Falling Resistance: Lv 6

Hunger Resistance: Lv 5

Poison Resistance: Lv 5

Loneliness Resistance: Lv 6

Magic Resistance: Lv 4

Dark Resistance: Lv 4

Light Resistance: Lv 3

Fear Resistance: Lv 3

Asphyxiation Resistance: Lv 4

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 4

Illusion Resistance: Lv 3

Instant Death Resistance: Lv 2

Curse Resistance: Lv 2

Confusion Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Roll: Lv 7

View Status: Lv 7

Scorching Breath: Lv 5

Whistle: Lv 2

Dragon Punch: Lv 3

Diseased Breath: Lv 6

Venom Fangs: Lv 7

Paralyzing Venom Claws: Lv 6

Dragon Tail: Lv 2

Bellow: Lv 2

Meteorite: Lv 2

Nutcracker: Lv 3

Human Transformation: Lv 7

Whirlwind Slash: Lv 5

Neckbreaker: Lv 4

Hi-Rest: Lv 6

Regenerate: Lv 5

Sacrifice: Lv —

Death: Lv 4

Soul Addition (Fake Life): Lv 1

Title Skills:

Dragon King's Son: Lv —

Walking Egg: Lv —

Klutz: Lv 4

Just an Idiot: Lv 1

Infighter: Lv 4

Pest Killer: Lv 4

Safety First: Lv 1

Liar: Lv 3

King of Evasion: Lv 2

Wrongdoer: Lv 7

Calamity: Lv 7

Chicken Runner: Lv 3

Mr. Chef: Lv 4

Dastardly King: Lv 7

Stalwart: Lv 4

Giant Killer: Lv 3

Ceramic Artisan: Lv 4

Clan Boss: Lv 1

Laplace Interference Authority: Lv 2

Foreknower of Eternity: Lv — Ant King: Lv —

Hero: Lv 1

The Human Realm Path... Is that the same as the six realms of reincarnation in Buddhism? That would make it one of six. I didn't know what this skill entailed, but if it was one of six paths, then five more—gods, demi-gods, hungry ghosts, and hells—were out there somewhere. Not that I want anything to do with any of those, if I'm being honest...

For one thing, my stats were insanely high now, and my high max level meant I could keep on racking up the numbers. *Can anyone out there beat me at this point?*

I decided I'd check out Soul Addition (Fake Life) and Human Realm Path a bit more after I got to the forest and settled in. Then I'd find a place to sleep, maybe rustle up some food... There'd better be some delicious monsters nearby.

Part 2

ONCE I ARRIVED SAFELY in the forest, I decided to stay close to the river. Better to have a secure water source nearby, since then it wouldn't matter too much if it was hard to come by any monsters.

I decided to check my new skills as I walked along. I *really* didn't want to rely on that thing at this point, but...

Hey, Divine Voice. Show me the fishy one—Soul Addition (Fake Life).

Normal Skill “Soul Addition (Fake Life)”

Grants a false life to those who lack one.

Sooo...some kind of revival magic? The whole “fake” part was pretty creepy. It seemed less like your average resuscitation spell than some curse to turn you into a zombie. I could try it out on a monster sometime and see how worthwhile it might end up if I mastered it—although I didn't have high hopes.

All right. Next, the other sketchy one. I swear, I never get any good skills. I'm not even sure it's worth checking this one out...

Sacred Skill “Human Realm Path”

Gives the power to control the human realm. Its original power was lost, but it will greatly affect future evolution options.

W-well, that was considerably more vague than I was expecting. It was a skill without levels, so I assumed I could treat it like a Title Skill. It would affect my evolution options, so that was good news... Still, it was hard to feel excited about it. “Human Realm Path” might sound innocuous, but I knew better than to trust it.

“Raar! Raar!” My left-headed partner stretched out their neck toward the river. They were thirsty, so both of us leaned down. My partner—heck, let's just go with “Partner”—slurped down water noisily. Chunks of what looked like plaque poured out of their mouth; I was glad I was upstream.

I lifted my head and saw a simple stone building across the river. The entrance must have been on the other side. It was about four meters high, four meters wide, and probably about ten meters deep—fairly large. I stood a chance of fitting inside if I ducked down low enough, and it had the advantage of being close to the river. *Might not be a bad idea to make that my base for a while.*

I spread my wings and flew across the river. My landing caused the ground around me to shudder. *Whoops, I better be more careful.* Nearby monsters might have stirred because of the noise I just made, not to mention those dangerous people that lived around here—what were they called? Ah, right. The supposedly evil Lithovar Tribe.

I walked over to the stone building as quietly as I could. Going around the perimeter, I saw two dragon statues marking the entrance—but they weren't just regular dragons. They were two-headed dragons, just like me. Hmm, they were pretty detailed too. *Time to take a closer look at these things...*

As I approached the statues, I sensed a monster lurking inside the building, and a big one, at that. *Dang, already occupied.* Figuring it was too dangerous to go in unprepared, I decided to leave it for now. I was turning my back to leave when Partner opened their big mouth.

"Graar?"

They seemed to ask, *Are you sure you want to run away?* Nowadays I could tell Partner's thoughts just by looking at their face and listening to the tone of their voice. I chalked it up to my new skill: Mutual Understanding.

I was trying to work out what else about the building was putting me on edge when I heard a scream from inside.

"Ah... N-no! Noooooo!"

There's a human in there with that monster?! I focused more intently on my Psychic Sense skill and—yep—I detected at least two humans inside. I circled back around to the entrance.

"Raaaaar!" I let out a Bellow to draw the monster out. My aggressive entrance might have cost me the advantage of striking first, but I had no other choice. I didn't want to waste the time it took to dodge the trees in my way, so I

body slammed through them.

I heard something stand up inside the building. A yellow monster burst out of the entrance.

“Ke-raaaaar!”

It turned to me with a ridiculously loud roar. It must’ve been about seven meters long—about my size. Physically, it looked like a giant lion, with yellow fur and a dark, reddish-brown mane. Spiky protrusions topped the ends of its long tail. It had a seriously creepy face, like a mix of a human girl and a leopard or something. Blood dripped from the right corner of its mouth, where the body of a human child peeked out from its maw. The monster’s fangs had pierced the child’s stomach. It was a horrific sight.

I froze as I faced the monster. I knew if I provoked it even more, it would end up eating the child. If I moved, it would move. While both of us stood there, waiting for the other to attack, I checked its stats.

Species: Manticore Status: Normal Lv: 73/80

HP: 453/453

MP: 142/142

Attack: 413

Defense: 228

Magic: 194

Agility: 534

Rank: B

Special Skills: Nekomata: Lv — Undercover: Lv 4

Psychic Sense: Lv 6

Grecian Language: Lv 1

Resistance Skills: Physical Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 5

Fire Resistance: Lv 3

Poison Resistance: Lv 2

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills: Paralyzing Claws: Lv 7

Paralyzing Bite: Lv 8

Human Transformation: Lv 8

Sandstorm: Lv 6

1,000 Needles: Lv 9

Surprise Attack: Lv 7

Title Skills: Cunning: Lv 6

Tenacious: Lv 6

Chaser: Lv 9

Feline Pride: Lv 3

Swift Wind: Lv 7

Final Evolution: Lv —

A Manticore? I'd never seen such a...well, monstrous monster until now. Human-headed lions weren't exactly a dime a dozen. Judging by its stats, it specialized in physical attacks. It was a lower rank and had slightly worse overall stats than I did, but it did have higher agility—and sometimes agility was enough to decide a battle.

Hm? W-wait a minute... This thing has Human Transformation! And at a higher skill level! Ooh, I'm so freakin' jealous... What do you need with that skill?! Wh-whatever, not important right now. Gotta focus on the battle.

Yo, Partner? Go ahead and heal that kid in the monster's mouth, otherwise they're gonna die, I called out to my partner silently. They nodded.

"Graar!" A ball of light—Hi-Rest—shot toward the Manticore's mouth. The child's hand twitched. They were alive. Now, how could I get them out of that thing's mouth?

“Ke-raaaaar!” The Manticore’s jaws moved, gnashing its teeth through the child’s back. One wrong move would spell instant death. The Manticore clearly took my Hi-Rest spell as a threat—it leapt toward me.

I had it beat in every stat except for agility. Rather than evade, I focused on defending against its attacks until the opportunity for a counter arose; I was certain I could defeat it with two good hits. It had no recovery skills, which was unusual for a higher-ranking monster.

“Ke-raaar!” The Manticore came right at me, rearing up on its hind legs. It prepared to strike with a scratching attack. I used my wings to cover my body and felt its claws scrape my wings as I spun around. They passed over my head, but it must’ve dragged its claws along my back because I felt a searing pain race through me.

I tried to sense its location and whip it with my tail, but I slashed nothing but air. I leapt forward and turned around, careful to watch out for another attack. I was face-to-face with the Manticore once again. *Damn it.* I should’ve just gone on an all-out attack instead of trying to defend myself. I had enough HP to burn.

“Ke-raaar!” The Manticore looked pretty smug about its successful attack. It charged toward me again.

All right, this time I’m gonna kick it into next week. I didn’t want to be too overconfident and spook it, though. As the Manticore ran toward me, I shot off three Whirlwind Slashes.

“Ke-raaaaar!” It swayed back and forth, dodging, and then let out a cry that seemed to say, *“Did you really think that was gonna work?”* Kicking off the ground, it jumped into the air in the exact same stance as before. It radiated confidence, as if daring me to dodge its next attack.

If I could intercept its attack... Nah, nix that. Best to play it safe. One wrong move might goad it into doing something else unexpected. I took a half step backward and lowered my neck. The Manticore’s claws dug into my shoulder. That was what I wanted—I used that opportunity to pierce my Venom Fangs right into its stomach. I felt the venom seep into its body.

“Ke-raar?!” The Manticore started flailing, so I used my front legs to kick it away. Its body slammed into a tree. It was momentarily stunned as it skidded

across the ground on its stomach. Blood poured out of the wound from my bite.

For all its cockiness, it sure went down easy. I wasn't too surprised—it had pretty low HP and Defense, after all, along with zero recovery skills. It just wasn't tough enough. I sent off a Whirlwind Slash toward its half-open mouth.

"Ke-raa..." Its human face whipped to the side as if receiving a slap across the cheek. The blood-covered child tumbled from its mouth.

I'd achieved my first goal. Now all I had to do was fry that Manticore to a crisp without drawing its attention back to the child. Dinner was taken care of!

It stood up, panting. *"Ke-raa, raa..."*

I thought I could win if I landed one more hit on it. *Bring it on. You gonna attack me the same way again? Huh?* Nope, nope. Carelessness was the great danger. Monsters could do desperate things when wounded, so I needed to stay on my guard.

"Ke-raa..."

Now, what skill would it use? I braced myself. The Manticore lifted its front legs, then used its back legs as an anchor to spin around fast, kicking up a cloud of dust in its wake. Once its back was turned to me, its front feet came back to the ground—and it raced forward in one smooth movement.

Running away this late in the game? To be fair, anyone in their right mind would do the same. Its attacks weren't working, and no one liked getting punched in the face. I'd turn tail as well in the same situation. It was faster than me, so if it wanted to flee, there was nothing I could do about it, except maybe use Roll to catch up with it. But right now, my priority was the injured child. The Manticore was poisoned and had lost a lot of blood. Its HP was low to begin with, so I'd probably find its dead body later. I could go out looking for it after I was done here.

Part 3

I RAN OVER TO WHERE the child lay bleeding from her stomach. “*Raar!*” Partner let out a roar, and the child’s wound began to close. Her face was still pale, but she was alive. I’d made it in time.

Title Skill “Hero” Lv 1 became Lv 2.

Oh, hey—that skill went up. It *was* okay for that skill to go up, right...? Its original owner had left such a bad impression on me that I couldn’t be sure...

At any rate, my priority right now was the child. She looked barely ten years old, with pale skin and lines drawn below her eyes. She wore a strange black dress with long sleeves, maybe some kind of traditional clothing. I checked her status.

Arles Terba Species: Lithovar Status: Fainted (Slight) Lv: 12/60

HP: 43/43

MP: 30/30

She was only unconscious, which meant she’d be okay. Even better, her condition was slight, meaning that she’d probably wake up soon. *Good, good.* With the disparity in its stats, it wouldn’t have surprised me if the Manticore *had* killed the kid with one bite. It was a miracle that she survived. Was that Manticore into torture or something? Had it been playing with its food?

It made sense. Its cruel face and ominous Title Skills suited a sadist pretty well. I couldn’t complain too much about its cruel nature, though, since that was the only way I managed to save the girl in time.

Hm? Where have I seen that girl’s species before...

“There’s no human population, but I’ve heard rumors that a dangerous class of demons called the Lithovar Tribe dwells there.”

She must be one of the tribespeople Adoff mentioned. He said the forest was so big I probably wouldn't ever run into any of them! I must've set a new record. *I should be okay though, right? She's not gonna open her mouth real wide and eat me the second she wakes up. Hopefully.*

Her stats weren't very high, and she didn't have any skills that stood out. She looked like any old human to me. I looked down at her ordinary, adorable little girl face. Adoff said they were a class of demons, but she didn't have a rank on her status. They must have been a sub-type of humans.

Suddenly, I felt a presence behind me—two people. I turned and saw a girl watching me from inside the stone building. She was dressed in the same way as Arles but with a long scarf wrapped around her head. It dangled down to her arms. She also wore a round mask on her face; a strange horn emerged from it.

I realized that what I thought was a scarf was actually cloth woven into the mask, almost like a cowl. The girl held another mask in her hands with the same material attached. I guessed that one belonged to Arles. I thought maybe the girl wouldn't approach if I stayed too close, so I took a step backward. The girl ran to put the mask on Arles's head. Then she looked up at me.

"Th-thank you, Dragon God." She bowed her head. She scooped Arles up in her arms and ran off with her. Man, did it ever feel good to be thanked! I was expecting a rock to the face or something. But why'd she call me "Dragon God"? Maybe they had some kind of legend in their village about a dragon who looked like me? I didn't think two-headed dragons were all that common.

I turned back toward the stone building. Then, like a flash, I remembered those two-headed dragon statues by the entrance.

Wait, what if that's a shrine to a dragon god or something? Did the Lithovars build it? Has my time finally come?! I'm finally gonna be popular? Damn, long live the Lithovar Tribe!

There was just one problem, though: my Dragon Scale Powder curse. But there was no sense in worrying about that now. Don't count your dragon eggs before they've hatched, as they say. *Chill, Illusia, chill.* The way my luck usually went, it wouldn't surprise me if an army charged in and destroyed the shrine. Getting so happy would only set me up for the more painful disappointment

that would inevitably follow. I had to keep my expectations low. I shook my head, trying to force the fantasies out of my mind.

What mattered right now was checking the temple, since it was going to be my house from now on. I stuck my head inside and saw remnants of monster bones and bloodstains scattered around. *Eh, it's a bit dirty, but it'll do.*

Lodgings were secured. Now for something to eat. I looked around and spotted a strange-looking creature. Dumpling-shaped clumps were stuck to its furry body, which was about twice the size of a human's but with one very long tentacle wriggling around... *Gah! That's a spider!!* It wasn't a tentacle at all. It was on its back, all of its legs but one ripped off. *You're a mean one, Miss Manticore...*

What I'd mistaken for a clump of dumplings was in fact a cocoon-like wad stuck to its stomach. An egg sac? I thought that spiders left their eggs in their nests. Then it clicked. It had wrapped silk around its egg sac to protect it.

The spider glanced over at me...before it stopped moving altogether. At first, I thought it didn't want to be noticed, but then it slowly waved its leg. It didn't seem to be in as much pain as before. I nodded and then stuck my claw into its body to put it out of its misery. Leaving it to die a long, agonizing death felt far too cruel.

Gained 40 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 40 Experience Points.

The spider was near death, so I didn't gain much experience from it. Its body wasn't much of an appetizing sight either. *Maybe I'll go bury it somewhere.* I carefully cut the egg sac from its body with my claws. *Now, what should I do with this? Hm? Where'd it go?*

"Graar! Graar!" Partner swung their head back and forth happily as they pushed their forehead against the egg sac.

What the heck are you doing?!

Part 4

I SEARCHED EVERY INCH of the temple for something to eat, but all I dredged up was the legless spider (rest in peace), its egg sac (currently being worn on my partner's head), rotting meat covered in flies, and human bones. The bones were so small that they must have belonged to a child, maybe another of the Manticore's Lithovar victims. It had to have been a while since they died. Was the Manticore partial to eating kids? Gross.

It pained me that I hadn't finished it off. I should've finished it in one blow while it was distracted, but it had been too fast. The Manticore might be gorging on children and egg-laden female monsters right now. Thinking about it made my stomach churn.

"*Graa, graar!*" Partner, clueless as to my inner turmoil, thrashed around excitedly, the egg sac still stuck to their forehead. No need to force my guilt onto them, what with them being a monster and all. Human bones weren't that big of a deal in the monster realm.

Wait, *was* that excitement? They could be frustrated because they had tried to eat the eggs but got them stuck on their forehead instead. "*Graar! Graar!*"

I was convinced. I had the skill of Mutual Understanding, but that didn't mean I automatically understood whatever went on inside of Partner's head. Sometimes they freaked me out. I lifted up one of my front legs to try to get the egg sac off, but Partner pulled back their neck and glared at me. "*Graar!*"

It was a sharper roar than before, almost hostile. *What? Don't tell me you actually want to keep those things?*

"*Graar!*"

Partner nodded. *Whoa, they understood me. I mean, wait! What are we gonna do with a pet spider? Taking care of a living creature is serious business, you know! And it's a monster!*

My partner pulled their neck back again, refusing to hand over the egg sac.

You're so stubborn... Hmph.

I looked over at the spider's dead body to identify it.

Araneae: Rank C—. A giant, furry spider with a calm temperament. It becomes hostile when it is pregnant. One of the most skilled weavers among spiders.

Guess it's only natural for a rank C— monster. All right, if you're that hung up on it, I guess we can keep it safe until whatever's inside hatches. Felt like the mom practically begged me on her deathbed for that much, anyway. Keep in mind that we might have to let them loose after that, okay?

I decided to bury the rotting meat and the bones outside. Would it be better to take the bones back to the village...? No, that might give them the wrong idea. Even I would lose it if a dragon showed up with the bones of one of my friends. *Outside burial it is.*

I also had that skill Soul Addition (Fake Life) at my disposal. It promised to grant artificial life, but I wouldn't know what that meant unless I tried it. It had to be some kind of revival spell. Maybe it was worth trying out.

Soul Addition (Fake Life)!

Nothing happened.

Don't tell me Partner stole it... Can't you leave one little skill for me? I was so eager to try out my new skill, but nooo, of course it was Partner's! They'd been hogging all the new skills since I evolved, or at least that was how it felt.

C'mon, Partner. Use Soul Addition (Fake Life). I promise I won't try to take away the egg sac anymore.

They nodded and leaned their head toward the bones. They let out a soft "graar," and a black light enveloped the bones. The bones gleamed in the light, then started floating in the air before they gradually came together as one. Once they reached their correct positions, the black light faded and then disappeared. The skeleton quivered. Its skull tilted upward, fixing the hollow spaces where its eyes had once been toward me.

It began to shakily walk in my direction, but it trembled so much that its

shoulder slammed into the shrine's wall, its left arm bone falling off and onto the ground. It bent down to try to pick it back up again, but then its legs fell off and its whole body collapsed.

Normal Skill "Soul Addition (Fake Life)" Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

S-so it's not going to give it flesh? I doubt it has any memories of its past life... or any sense at all, for that matter. The heck do I use this for? This was a bad idea. Should I shatter it? B-but...

Title Skill "Dastardly King" Lv 7 has become Lv 8.

Oh, great! One of the bad Title Skills leveled up again! A terrible guilt overwhelmed me, as though I'd done something sacrilegious. I shouldn't meddle in matters of life and death...

The skeleton sat leaned up against the shrine's wall, holding the scattered parts of its bones together. Its jawbone chattered, trembling loudly as if it were crying. Did it remember being human after all? I could never destroy it in that case. *Ahh, this was a really, really, really bad idea!*

"Graar!" Partner roared, and a fresh wave of black light covered the skeleton. The scattered leg and arm bones once again affixed to their original spots.

So that's what the spell does... I suddenly wondered if I could check the skeleton's stats.

Species: Wight Status: Cursed Lv: 1/5

HP: 7/7

MP: 2/2

Attack: 2

Defense: 1

Magic: 3

Agility: 2

Rank: F

Special Skills: Grecian Language: Lv 1

Undead: Lv — Dark Type: Lv — Resistance Skills: Debuff Resistance: Lv — Physical Resistance: Lv 1

Magic Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills: Gale: Lv 1

Poor Curse: Lv 1

Life Drain: Lv 1

Title Skills: Evil Dragon's Servant: Lv —

A w-wight?! Yikes... I mean, the way it looks tipped me off, but there you have it! It's not human anymore at all! The Debuff Resistance skill seemed like it could get super strong once it evolved, though... Hey, what's the deal with "Evil Dragon's Servant"? I don't remember asking for one of those!

Should I destroy it? Maybe I should destroy it. Leaving it intact definitely counted as meddling with death. Besides, what if it was in pain? How was it cursed when it had a Debuff Resistance skill in the first place? Maybe Soul Addition (Fake Life) was a curse in and of itself...

But bringing something back to life and then killing it right away was too sad. I chose to get the full lowdown on what wights were before I made any big decisions.

Wight: Rank F. A corpse possessed by an evil spirit. Not very strong. Its danger lies in how it pretends to be a regular skeleton, then attacks unsuspecting humans.

Wasn't it only an evil spirit because of my magical powers, though? It was my Soul Addition (Fake Life) that woke it up. Thinking of it that way, I could destroy it without feeling bad; I'd assumed it was a human soul that hadn't come all the way back to life or something. Good, good. This had taught me a valuable lesson: You should never use corpses for any purpose whatsoever. *Sorry about this, Wight, but I'm gonna destroy you now.*



I lifted my arm, and the wight dragged itself to its knees and bowed its head to me. That Evil Dragon's Servant skill at work, presumably—after all, I was the one who technically created it.

I gently pushed my claw into the space at the back of its neck. It didn't resist, but its jaw bone began chattering again. Was it laughing? Or trembling? Something told me it knew what was happening. *Hmm...*

I lowered my arm and observed the wight. Bones still chattering, it looked up at me, puzzled, as it tipped its head to the side. It reminded me of a sheepish kid caught with one hand in the cookie jar, not least because the wight's skeleton was small enough to pass for a child.

I-I can't destroy it. I could tell somehow that it could remember its past life. *N-now what?* There was no way I was showing this thing to the Lithovar Tribe.

"Raar..." I motioned toward the back of the shrine. The wight stood and staggered over obediently.

What do I do, what do I do? This is on a whole other scale compared to a spider egg sac! I'm not cut out to raise a skeleton child! And it's gonna stay a child, because only alive things get older! What were you even like when you were alive, anyway...?! Th-this is serious sacrilege against the dead!

Part 5

I AWOKE TO THE morning sunlight shining into the shrine and raised my head to greet it. Yesterday, Partner ate a lump of that rotting meat, which completely ruined my appetite, so I went to bed without dinner.

All that aside, it was nice to have a home again. In the desert, I was exposed to the elements the entire time. Blame the lingering emotions from my past life, but not having a home was unsettling. Last night, I slept soundly for the first time in a long while...

“Graaaaar! Graaaaar!”

...Though not as soundly as Partner, who was still down for the count and roaring in their sleep. The rattling sound coming from the back of the shrine told me that the skeleton—the wight—realized I’d woken up. Even in the darkness, I could see the skeleton was yet again missing a leg. *Sure is creepy seeing it first thing in the morning... Keep your legs on, would ya?*

“Raar. Raar!” C’mon, Partner. Put it back together again.

“Graa...” A lukewarm response. Their eyes were slightly open, but they sounded half-asleep. I opened my mouth and pretended to go after the egg sac that was still stuck to their forehead. This earned me an accusing roar: *“Graar, graar!”*

I made them use Soul Addition (Fake Life) to fix the wight’s leg. I wondered if we could find a way to stop its limbs from breaking so much, although I had plenty of MP to keep fixing it, so it didn’t really matter. Maybe if the wight leveled up, its bones would get stronger. It shouldn’t take long for it to evolve... but one wrong move could get it killed.

Hm? What happens when a wight dies?

I looked at it. Its neckbone tipped to the side with a creak. *I-I just won’t worry about that right now.* It’s not like I was eager to find out, after all. I poked my head out of the shrine and checked my surroundings using Psychic Sense. I

could feel something approaching. I yanked my head back inside and looked around to see if I could spot it.

It was a group of people wearing masks—the Lithovar Tribe. There were five muscular men and one fairly short woman. The woman wore a band of feathers on her head and had a colorful piece of cloth draped around her body. She held a staff, so I figured she must be the Lithovar's mage or something. *No, on second thought...she must be a priestess.*

The men carried animals slung over their backs: a fat boar, a bird with a long neck, fish in a trap woven from sticks...and then, carried between two people, a large pot. Each of them laid the items down in a straight line.

I stayed still and watched them from inside the shrine. *Is all that for me? I can take it, right? That's what this is all about?*

I stayed hidden while the woman stepped in front of the food. "O Dragon God, the sacred god of our Lithovar Tribe! We have come to pray and bring gifts of appreciation for your second coming. O Dragon God! We beseech you, please give us your eternal protection and bless us with prosperity!"

S-sorry, but you've got the wrong dragon, lady. I've never been here before, and I definitely don't have any blessings to give. Curses or nothing, I'm afraid. Plus, I'm not sure I can commit to living here for eternity...

The woman's prayers went on and on for quite some time.

Uhh, sh-should I go out there or something? Timing is everything at a moment like this. Maybe I should watch a little longer and find a good time to make my entrance.

"Graar?" Partner pushed me aside and tried to stretch their neck out of the shrine. I quickly backed farther inside.

Calm down! This was a good chance for me to get into a human village. I couldn't waste the opportunity. *All right, starting today I'm the Lithovar Tribe's Dragon God! No more Ouroboros for me.* I clapped my own cheeks to pump myself up.

I was certain they'd give me a warm welcome even if I bungled the timing. It would all work out; surely the last dragon god didn't wait around for the perfect

time to show up. I was just taken off guard by all those prayers—but it would be my loss if I let it scare me into staying put. You know what they say about confidence: Fake it till you make it.

I shook my head, trying to clear out the nerves.

“All of our prosperity and power is because of you, O Dra—”

“*Raaaaaar!*”

I stepped out, interrupting the priestess. She stared at me in shock. The men behind her mirrored her expression. I slowly backed away and retreated into the shrine...then I buried my face against the floor.

Timing officially bungled. I was so embarrassed. I knew I shouldn't have gone out until she was finished. Any idiot would've realized that. But she was just going on and on and on, so I thought she might not stop until I showed my face. Was the roar a mistake? Yeah, I probably shouldn't have roared to introduce myself.

The wight watched over me and trembled with concern as I kept my face against the ground. About ten minutes later, I risked poking my head out of the shrine again. The Lithovar Tribe was gone. I was worried they'd figured out that I wasn't a dragon god, but the offerings were still here. Maybe they bought my act after all.

I wondered what they thought about a dragon god who interrupted their prayers with a roar and then ran away. *Couldn't one of you have stayed behind? It took a lot of guts for me to come out in the first place, you know!*

Part 6

I DECIDED I SHOULD WALK around the forest a bit. I never got experience points from the Manticore, so it must be alive out there somewhere. I needed to take inventory of the easiest monsters to hunt out here too, although thanks to the offerings, I was good on food for a while. *Now that I think about it, am I allowed to eat offerings?*

I wanted to take a peek into the Lithovar Tribe's village, but I suspected that making the first move might not be the best idea. Anyway, I shouldn't go roaming around before I had a lay of the land.

My plan this time was to hunt monsters that looked edible, and only ones that didn't force me to go out of my way. I wanted to secure a hunting spot in the forest.

Now that I had a plan, I left the shrine—only to hear a clattering noise behind me. I turned to see the wight following me. *Nuh-uh, it's too dangerous for you to come along. Though I guess it's just as dangerous for me to leave you behind...* I did want to level it up to a point where it wouldn't break all the time, so I decided to bring it with me. I could always turn around if I saw a dangerous monster ahead and, worst case scenario, I could put the wight inside of my mouth and use Roll to run away. That said, I doubted there was any monster in this forest stronger than I was.

As I walked through the forest, I paid close attention to my Psychic Sense ability. A good understanding of the hunting prospects in this area was vital, and it was always better to spot the enemy first, regardless of whether I chose to fight or flee.

C'mon, Wight. Make sure you follow me carefully.

The wight suddenly tackled my body. It stood no chance against me, of course, and so all of its bones from the shoulders up crashed to the ground. *H-hey, what the heck are you doing?* It paid no attention to its wrecked body and continued trying to tackle me, only succeeding in adding to the pile of loose

bones on the ground. *What's wrong? Are you confused or something?*

"Graaar! Graaar!" Suddenly, Partner started roaring. They were so excited that they wouldn't respond to me, no matter what I did. *Wh-what's going on? A status effect?*

I didn't sense any monsters, so maybe a plant was to blame. I felt fine, but there was no telling when Confusion might hit. I turned to leave the area when a bug the size of a red ant bit my tail.

It was a black-striped bug with extremely rancid vibes. Its eerily long body had eight legs that bent sharply at each joint. Jagged teeth lined its mouth, but they didn't seem to actually be teeth; there were too many of them. The closest thing I could compare it to was a tailless whip scorpion, except it *did* have a tail and was currently using it to suck my blood. In one word: disgusting.

"Raaaaaar!"

"Graaaaaar!"

Partner and I roared in unison. I whipped my tail around and slammed the bug into a tree. *Splat*. Bright red blood poured out of the tiny monster's mouth...thing. It was probably my blood. Thinking about how it bit me sent shivers through my body and made me wanna throw up. I seriously felt sick. I wanted to wash my tail. I wanted to cry. Time to leave this forest. Why didn't I sense that a tough monster like that was out here?

"Raaar!"

I swung my arm upward and let off a Whirlwind Slash with all my might. The blades of wind cut into a tree and toppled it. The whip scorpion curled its long body to neatly dodge my attack and ran for it. Watching it move made me nauseous. *Why bother showing up if you're gonna flee right after? Seriously!*

"Graar! Graar! Graaar!" Partner roared. I saw a ball of black light chase after the whip-scorpion monster. They tried to cast Death on it but to no avail. The monster wasn't that fast, but both Partner and I were pretty agitated. I mean, I didn't even want to look at the thing.

I didn't want to chase after it either, but I'd have a tough time sleeping at night unless I killed it. My relief that it was finally out of sight was replaced by a

creepy sensation.

Haa, haa, haa. Where did it go? Damn it. My tail started tingling. It must've numbed me somehow. Snuck up on me, numbed me, and then sucked my blood. Like a mosquito.

It was gone for now, so I could relax a bit. *Thanks, Wight. You tackled me until your bones fell off so you could alert me to its presence. You saved me.*

I looked down at Wight. Its skull swayed from left to right.

Hm? What is it? What's the matter? Or was that just from the wind?

The skeleton bent its arm and pointed to my back. I turned and glanced behind me. The whip-scorpion monster was creeping up on me at an incredible speed—no, it couldn't be that fast. It wasn't. Its legs were so long that their mere movement created an illusion of speed. That was also why it could move so soundlessly.

"Graar! Graar! Graar!"

"Raaar! Raar! Raaar!"

I let out a Whirlwind Slash while Partner cast Death, but, since I could barely look at the creepy monster, it missed it by a hair. With my vision compromised, it might be best to aim for something else... I used Whirlwind Slash to pick up the fallen tree and whap it against the whip scorpion-thing's body. There was a crunching noise and creamy-colored liquid began to ooze out of its back. Its eight long legs kicked wildly. No chance of it running away now. I sent a Whirlwind Slash straight for its head, splitting it open. Then it stopped moving.

Gained 186 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 186 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 60 has become Lv 61.

Phew, that's a relief. Not only did it have stealth skills but also blood-draining and paralysis skills too? Creepy. There's no way I'm gonna eat that thing. But I will check out the info on it.

Avyssos: Rank C. It sneaks up on larger monsters and attaches itself, whereupon it sucks its prey's blood and replaces the amount it drains with its

own venomous bodily fluids. When its prey is near death, it will use its corpse as a nest to lay its eggs and raise its babies. It will generally target animals smaller than itself when hunting for food. Often engages in cannibalism.

Wh-whoa. Good thing I beat it, or I'd be an avyssos nest by now. The thought made me feel even more sick. I assumed my tail felt numb because of its bodily fluids...

Part 7

“G*RAAR! Graar!*”

After I made Partner use Soul Addition (Fake Life) on the freshly disassembled wight, they expressed an interest in the avyssos. Much as I tried to stop them, Partner was dead set on figuring out if it was edible or not. They must have been pretty hungry.

I couldn't even walk due to their flailing, so I gave in and let them approach the avyssos. Partner hesitantly leaned their head toward the dead body and sniffed it. They narrowed their eyes and then stuck out their tongue, inching closer, then closer still...

Partner opened their eyes all the way before their tongue touched the avyssos's body. For a few moments they stared into its lifeless eyes. *“Graar...”* Partner stopped moving their tongue. They let out a cry of lament and pulled their head back.

See? No way could I eat that thing. I don't blame you. For a moment there, I was worried Partner would wear the avyssos on its head.

Partner looked at me, their head trembling slightly as if about to cry. *Listen, I know you're hungry, but let's find something better to eat. We have the offerings back at the shrine.*

I left the avyssos's body and resumed my exploration of the forest. Meat was among the offerings, but surely there were more monsters here than creepy scorpion bugs. If I saw any rank E or F monsters, I could use them to level up the wight. Hopefully it'd stop falling apart all the time once it evolved.

I looked behind me at the wight. It looked back, training its empty eye sockets on me.

While I searched the forest, I found an indigo-colored mole and a monster that looked like an owl, but both were too fast for me to catch. The mole burrowed into the ground the moment it noticed me, and the owl had some

kind of skill that made it blend into its surroundings and disappear. The pool of potential battle partners for the wight was more like a dried-up puddle, and the pickings for food were just as slim. Maybe I could catch a monster and weaken it, then have the wight fight it? Hmm...

I stopped and turned around to look at the wight again. It came to a halt and faced me. The monsters in this forest were too high level for it. Was there a faster way for me to level it up? As I stared, suddenly a light bulb went off in my head.

W-wait, there is! All we had to do was use Soul Addition (Fake Life) to make a monster that was the same level as the wight. Then again, that skill meant meddling in life and death, and there was a strong argument that I should never touch it again. But if the skill could re-animate a skeleton, then maybe it could work on an inanimate object too?

It wouldn't be as sacrilegious if we made monsters out of something that never had a life in the first place, right? That'd be safe. We could make a monster the same level as the wight in a flash. Then, if things went awry, I could intervene and destroy it.

Time to search for something quick. Something that won't be too strong if I turn it into a monster...

I found a small tree, probably only a few years old. Its bark wasn't very thick, and it looked young judging by its color. It seemed like a convenient choice. As I made my way to the young tree, I looked over at the wight and gestured toward the tree with my chin.

I was trying to ask it, "Can you fight that?" It seemed to understand me and nodded. I turned toward Partner and roared.

"Graar..." They gave a sad cry and gritted their teeth.

C-c'mon. I promise we can start hunting after this and you can eat the first thing we catch. Pleeese? Watching the wight crumble apart every single time it does anything breaks my heart, and it's a pain for you too, isn't it?

"Grar." My thoughts must've reached Partner, because they turned toward the young tree and used Soul Addition (Fake Life) on it. A black light enveloped

the tree.

Normal Skill “Soul Addition (Fake Life)” Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

When the black light faded, I could make out small hollows on the tree trunk that resembled eyes and a mouth. Its body trembled and then pulled its roots from the ground in one movement. Dirt scattered all around. The tree curled up its roots to neatly form two shapes that looked like legs.

“Treeeee! Ke-tree!” Its mouth-hollow split open wide to emit a high-pitched war cry. It stomped its narrow roots on the ground as if to test them out, then started tottering on its legs to turn around. Suddenly, it stopped moving. It looked back and forth between me and the wight with its expressionless face.

Little Treant

Status: Cursed

Lv: 1/5

HP: 7/7

MP: 6/6

Attack: 1

Defense: 2

Magic: 3

Agility: 1

Rank: F

Special Skills:

Dark Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Take Root: Lv 1

Clay: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Evil Dragon's Servant: Lv —

I-It worked. I could generate an endless stream of minions if we kept this up! Its attack and agility were low, but its HP and Magic were pretty high. It'd be the perfect minion to have in a support role. I felt kind of attached now that I'd laid eyes on it, and imagining how it could grow made me excited. Judging by its Title Skill, I didn't think it would turn on me either. Time to change plans.

"Raar..." The wight was already approaching the treant, dodging its branches, and circling around behind it. Then it threw itself onto the treant's back. A black fog released from its body. The treant twisted around, trying to shake off its attacker, but the wight clung on tightly. One by one, its bones fell to the ground.

"Treeee! Treeee! Ke-tree!" The treant's movements became more sluggish as its color began to fade. It stopped moving. The black fog disappeared, leaving the treant withered as though drained of all water. *The Life Drain skill doesn't mess around.*

The treant's now dusky leaves fell to the ground as the wind blew. Despite my change of plans, all I could do was stand there, stunned, as I watched over the whole saga, unable to decide whether or not to stop the wight. By the time I finally snapped back to reality, the wight had gleefully gathered up the pieces of its own broken body and hobbled back over to me.

U-uh, I'd like to compliment you on a job well done, but...I feel really conflicted inside...

I cast a side-long glance at the withered up treant, then checked the wight's status as it came closer.

Species: Wight

Status: Cursed

Lv: 2/5

HP: 4/8

MP: 1/3

Wow, it didn't level up that much at all. When I did the same thing with Ballrabbit, I used the power-leveling method. Not to mention my own experience-point-boosting skill warped my realizations of how long it might take to level up. Guess that's how the cookie—or treant—crumbles. Sorry, little guy. Your sacrifice wasn't really worth it in the end.

Maybe it would be better to use power-leveling with the wight too. The issue was whether anything in this forest was strong enough for it to be effective.

I had Partner use Soul Addition (Fake Life) to put the pieces of the wight back together again. Would that make its HP recover? *What if using recovery magic on it actually damages it, since it's undead? Say it ain't so.*

I checked the wight's status once it had recovered. Thankfully, its HP had replenished as well. I breathed a sigh of relief but swore not to use recovery magic on it from now on, just in case. Who knew how healing would affect an undead monster? Back to the issue at hand: How could I level it up? As I pondered that, the wight began to poke my leg with its bony finger. It pointed to the small tree.

N-no, not that again. Sorry, I have a personal objection to it...

The wight hung its head with a creak. *Jeez, how bad do you wanna level up?*

Something had to change, or the wight would keep falling apart. If I even took my eyes off it for one second, it could get devoured by the avyssos. By that logic, it would make more sense if I went ahead and leveled it up, then.

"Graar, graar."

Hm? What's up, Partner?

Suddenly, I heard the words (*"Want. Drink water."*) in my head.

Wait, was that—?

Special Skill “Mutual Understanding” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

It was Partner’s voice! Their tongue hung out of their mouth as they glanced over at me, making a big production of panting loudly. *All right, cut the theatrics. I got it already.*

“Raar.” I made a noise and started walking, the wight following behind. We reached the river, and Partner took enthusiastic gulps of water. The inside of my mouth felt dry, so I dunked my entire head into the water to drink. After I had my fill, I lifted my head. In my reflection, I could see the water dripping off my mane, which was plastered to the back of my head. I opened my mouth slightly and checked my wicked-looking teeth. It struck me that I was totally used to being a dragon now—although, of course, I didn’t always look this evil.

I glanced over at the wight. It was crouched down by the edge of the river, looking at the surface of the water. It did so quietly and didn’t seem to be panicked by what it saw, although it had a melancholy air about it.

It trembled when it was afraid and poked me when it wanted my attention. Whether it had its memories of its past life or not, its gestures and behavior were identical to those of a human child. I was certain that it was more than a monster created out of thin air via Soul Addition (Fake Life).

“Raar...” I called out to the wight. It turned toward me and stood up. I wondered if it instinctually knew it would regain its flesh if it leveled up enough. That might explain its eagerness to fight. I could understand that after experiencing the pitfalls of Human Transformation so many times. It was only natural to want your human form back after waking up as a monster all of a sudden.

I strengthened my resolve and gestured toward a nearby young tree. *Use Soul Addition (Fake Life) on that thing. We’re gonna get the wight evolved before the end of the day.*

“Graar?” It sounded like Partner asked, “Are you for real?”

For real.

They used Soul Addition (Fake Life) and, exactly like before, the bark on the tree changed colors and a face appeared. Welcome to the world, little treant.

“Treee!” It pulled up its roots. The wight looked up at me gleefully.

“Raar.” On my signal, the wight started running, circled around to the back of the tree, and leapt up on it. The little treant thrashed, causing the wight’s bones to break off. It scooped one up before it fell to the ground, then used the sharp point to stab the little treant in the back.

“Ke-tree, ke-tree!”

The wight bit the treant, strangled it, and stabbed it with its own broken bones—this was shaping up to be a much dirtier fight than the last one. Had it run out of MP? It didn’t matter; the wight won in the end. They were only one level apart, and a quick status check revealed that the wight had the higher average stats of the two.

The treant fell to the ground, covered in wounds. The wight still clutched it and tumbled to the ground from the impact. Gathering up its broken body, it crawled back over to me.

I used my front leg to gently pat the wight on the head. Then I looked over toward the scarred little treant and bowed. Still not enough. We’d need more than five treants before the wight could evolve.

Part 8

IT TOOK LONGER than I expected to level the wight. My Walking Egg skill really skewed my perception of level grinding; I had no idea it would be such a pain to gain a paltry three levels.

The wight defeated six little treants and finally made it to level 4. Its stats had increased, so each little treant was easier to beat than the one before it. Three treants later, its level still hadn't maxed out. *Any minute now...*

The wight and I walked around, searching for young trees for Partner to turn into little treants.

Normal Skill “Soul Addition (Fake Life)” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

That skill kept leveling up too, since we were using it so much. Incidentally, I had Partner try to use the skill on a little treant who was out of HP—it didn't come back to life. The wight was nothing but bones, so it wasn't like the target being dead was the problem. It seemed more like the skill didn't work on targets that had previously been animated by Fake Life.

“Treee, ke-treee!” The little treant pulled its roots out of the ground and leapt toward the wight. The wight easily dodged it by leaping onto its back, broke off its branches, and then started biting its trunk.

“Ke-tree...” The little treant stopped moving and collapsed lifelessly to the ground.

The wight had to have leveled up by now. I hoped it might level up into something a bit more human.

Species: Wight

Status: Cursed

Lv: 5/5 (MAX)

HP: 14/14

MP: 1/6

Level MAX achieved. Now it should be able to evolve.

“Raar...” I spoke to the wight, and it looked up at me, nodding with a creak. I expected it to evolve, but it still looked the same. It just stared at me with those hollow eyes as if waiting for something. *Hm? Wh-what? What is it? Do I gotta do something now?*

It couldn't see its own status like I could. Did other monsters have to meet certain requirements before they evolved into something else? There was only one skill I had that might help out an undead monster.

Hey, Partner. Use it on the wight again. With as much mana as you can muster.

“Graar!” Partner growled, and a black light consumed the wight.

When the wight emerged from the remnants of the light, its bones were a bluish-white. A cross now marked its forehead. Its appearance was pretty much the same except for the markings by its eyes and all over its body, but those markings made it look far more like a monster now than a human. Maybe it was impossible to return it to the body it had while it was alive.

I wanted to know what it had evolved into, so I checked its status.

Species: Skull Low Mage

Status: Cursed

Lv: 1/13

HP: 15/15

MP: 1/10

Attack: 5

Defense: 3

Magic: 6

Agility: 3

Rank: E–

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 1

Undead: Lv —

Dark Type: Lv —

Resistance Skills:

Debuff Resistance: Lv —

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Gale: Lv 2

Poor Curse: Lv 2

Life Drain: Lv 1

Clay: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Evil Dragon's Servant: Lv —

Skull low mage? So, like a low-level skeleton mage, I guess? Makes sense for the next tier up to just be skull mage... N-not sure if it's gonna get a human body anytime soon...

W-well, its MP did increase quite a bit. That means it can attack from a safe distance more frequently. If the wight—drat, it evolved so I couldn't call it that anymore—if the skull low mage could provide support to me while I fought on the front lines, easy power leveling could be in the cards. It wouldn't be as dangerous, but it also wouldn't give the skull low mage as many experience points. But it would still be more effective than having it fight tons of battles with monsters of the same rank. The power-leveling method helped Ballrabbit

jump all the way to rank D pretty quickly, and, to be honest, I was wary about leveling up Soul Addition (Fake Life) too much. Using a skill to create things, only to immediately kill them off, didn't feel great.

As I stared at its face, I wondered what I'd do if the skull low mage stayed a pile of bones forever. It held out its hand for examination, as if pondering its appearance as well. It didn't seem happy, but who could blame it? Even if I asked if it remembered anything from its previous life, the skull low mage couldn't answer me. It was a skeleton. Skeletons don't have tongues.

Now that I thought about it, its real name, from when it was alive, didn't show up on its status screen. It felt weird to give it a new name every time it evolved, so I thought I should think up a permanent one for it. I wasn't sure whether it was a boy or girl, though. *Wight will do until I figure out a good name for it. Not that I'll ever say it out loud.*

I decided to let Wight rest for the day to recover its MP. We would go out hunting again tomorrow. For now, I'd eat the offerings for dinner. *Here's hoping the Lithovar Tribe shows up again.*

Chapter 2:

The Lithovar Tribe's Village

Part 1

THE SUNLIGHT SHINING DOWN on my eyelids stirred me awake. I crawled out of the shrine. *Morning already?* When I went to sleep, I lay down in the back of the cave, where it was darkest, but apparently I'd rolled all the way to the entrance in my sleep.

"Raaaaaaar!" I lifted my face toward the sky, opened my mouth wide, and yawned—loud enough to rouse Partner. They opened their eyes. The egg sac was still stuck to their forehead. *C'mon, Partner. I highly doubt a spider is going to be as friendly as Ballrabbit was.*

"Graar..." They glared at me with their eyes half-closed. Were they still tired? We must've slept for quite some time. They changed their tone as soon as their eyes fell on the leftover offerings from last night. "Graar! Graar! Graar!"

They stretched their neck out toward the offerings. I couldn't believe they were hungry after how much they gobbled down last night. Had we rationed all that food it could've lasted for a fairly long time, but they devoured at least half of it in one night. It looked like they would polish off the other half for breakfast. I couldn't complain, considering how much they did for me...but I'd appreciate a *little* self-restraint.

More Lithovar offerings would be really welcome about now, but I hadn't seen them at all so far, and I wasn't sure if I would. I wondered if I'd scared them the day before or if they'd worked out that I wasn't a real dragon god. Or maybe offerings weren't the kind of thing you gave daily in the first place...?

While I pondered this, my other head stuck their snout in the wooden fish trap and started pigging out. In that short time, they had gnawed the birds and boars to nothing but bones. *You already ate those?* Whatever Partner ate filled up my own belly, so I tried to let them have as much food as they wanted to butter it up...but I still missed eating.

"Ptooey!" My other head spit out a boar's bone with a satisfied snort. I picked it up and gnawed on it for a while, then spit it out myself. Partner looked at me

with pity.

("Would have. Left you some. If you. Said something.")

Oho! Another mental message. Now it really felt like the two of us had Mutual Understanding. I looked at the large pot next to the remnants of Partner's food. It seemed untouched.

I sniffed it, but it didn't seem edible. If it had meat inside, Partner would've gobbled it up by now. I tried poking it lightly with my front leg and heard a splashing noise inside. Some kind of drink?

I put my mouth on the edge of the lid to open it and found clear water within. No, when I leaned in closer there was a pungent scent to it. *Alcohol?* I took a closer look, but just then, Partner stretched out their neck, bit the rim of the pot, and lifted their chin to the sky. They drank the entire pot in one go. They tossed their neck and slammed the empty pot to the ground, where it broke with a loud crash. Partner licked their lips and lapped up the rest of the alcohol they had splashed everywhere.

"Graar!" They let out a satisfied roar, drooling.

Y-you big jerk! You said you'd give me some next time! And why'd you have to go and break the pot? What a waste!

"Graaar." They continued happily licking the pieces of the broken pot. Apparently they really liked alcohol.

Now that we were all out of offerings, we would have to fend for ourselves. We had to hunt. I'd use Wight as my support member so it could gain experience. Wait...speaking of Wight, where was it? I didn't remember seeing it when I woke. I used Psychic Sense to check my surroundings and got a weak ping from behind the shrine. *That must be Wight.* I circled around the shrine to try to find it.

Just as I expected, I found Wight crouched behind the shrine, digging in the earth. It grabbed something in the shallow hole it had dug and pulled it out. A lump of dirt? No, more solid than that. It was a black cloth covered in dirt. Wight brushed the dirt off to reveal a pattern that looked like embroidered ivy. I recognized the pattern from the clothes worn by the Lithovar Tribe. This had to

be something that Wight wore, back when it was alive. It cleaned as much of the dirt off as it could. Its jaw chattered with satisfaction. It bent its knees to try to put the clothes on but then jolted and turned around.

The hollows of its eyes stared at me. It glanced away shyly—if you could call it a glance—then crouched down. I turned away, feeling like I'd seen something I shouldn't have.

I guess Wight had been naked this whole time, so now it didn't want me to watch it get dressed. I waited until the rustling of fabric stopped and then turned back to see that Wight was now clothed. Streaked with dirt and torn in various places as it was, I could still tell that it was a black dress. It resembled the one the Lithovar girl was wearing when I saved her from the Manticore.

When the tribe came to give me the offerings, the men had worn pants, so Wight must have been a girl. She slowly turned in a circle, her bones clattering. She looked eager to say something, and when I didn't respond, she tipped her head to the side.

I-Is she asking my opinion on her outfit? U-uh, well, y'know...she's just a skeleton... But...I guess she looks cute? Yeah.

Part 2

I TOOK WIGHT to go explore the forest again. This time my goals were to get food, evolve Wight, and gain some levels of my own. I had a bonus goal too: make contact with the Lithovar Tribe. *Hope I find something tasty.* The offerings had included rice and boar meat, so I figured those things were around if I looked hard enough.

Next up was evolving Wight: My aim was to get her some flesh back. The thought of her staying stuck as a skeleton forever was heartbreaking.

I paused for a moment to consider my last goal. The Lithovar Tribe's village should be somewhere nearby. Would they be scared if I approached them? They hadn't tried to come see me again today. I wondered if they'd forget about me if I didn't make the next move. On the other hand, if I showed up and they took it as an act of aggression, they might turn against me. But on the *other, other hand...* Partner glared coldly at me as I dithered over potential outcomes.

"Graar."

They shook their head, exasperated, and then faced forward. They gestured with their chin, and I heard (*"Hurry up. And walk."*) in my head. Now I felt really dumb. Was I really spacing out that much?

Thinking about it, it wouldn't be a good idea to meet the Lithovar Tribe today. I had Wight with me. I could see it being painful for her to see her old friends or family in her current form. I would focus on hunting as my main goal today. That was the best idea.

"Graar! Graar!" After a few steps, Partner started swinging their head around again, flinging drool everywhere.

What, did you find something? You can just use Telepathy to tell me you, y'know. It levels up the skill when you do.

("Yummy! Yummy!") There really wasn't much difference between its

telepathic messages and its roars. Ballrabbit had a much bigger vocabulary. I followed Partner's gaze and saw something glowing faintly. It was no bigger than a small animal, completely flat and devoid of any features. It wore no clothes and looked to be made of clay, roughly molded in the shape of a person. It hid behind the stump of a tree and peeked out at us. It didn't look edible. I didn't fancy testing if it was. What the heck was it?

Laran: Rank E. Its unique appearance has earned it monikers such as "guardian of the forest," "forest dwarf," "tree sprite," and so on. They appear in many anecdotes. They have mild-mannered personalities and survive by draining mana from trees. Avoid angering them at all costs.

There's no way we should mess with that thing!

("Yummy! Yummy!") Nope! That thing's way too creepy to keep on the menu. It wouldn't fill you up even if you did eat it. I dragged Partner in the other direction...only to glance backward and find that there were now three laran. Their whitish-green glowing figures stood next to each other in a friendly line. When I our gazes met, all three of them shrugged simultaneously, their auras of light expanded, and then they suddenly disappeared.

"Graar..." Partner hung their head dejectedly. *Were you that excited about eating them? Sorry, but those things are way too spooky for my palate.*

I used Psychic Sense to search for food only to suddenly receive a human-like ping on my radar. A Lithovar, perhaps? *Hmm, now I'm curious. Maybe I'll take a tiny peek. Ugh, but what if they spot me? Then again, it'd be awkward to go out of my way to avoid them when they're so close... I'll just show my face and see what happens. One quick glance and then I'll be on my way. I wanted to thank them for the offering anyway, so... Yeah.*

The only problem with that plan was Wight. Letting them see each other was a recipe for disaster. I glanced behind me to find Wight looking sadly up at me.

U-ugh... Well, maybe it'd be enough to steal a glance at them from afar. A quick little hello, and then if they try to get closer, I'll back away so they don't see Wight.

I tracked the ping from my Psychic Sense as slowly and quietly as possible. I didn't do a very good job, due to my big hulking dragon body, but I tried.

And I was determined not to let Partner's wild neck swings bother me. Nope, not one bit.

"Graar! Graar!"

Can I chop you off yet? Pipe down!

As I got closer, I sensed two humans and another presence that was much fainter. I could tell that the humans were excited. Were they fighting a monster? I should hurry up if they were. I didn't want to see any human casualties, and I owed the Lithovar Tribe for the offerings they gave me.

I turned around. Wight tottered behind me but suddenly stopped. *"Raar..."* I patted the ground, indicating that she should wait here. She looked beyond me and then nodded. She readily obeyed even my slightest gesture, though I didn't know why. The Evil Dragon's Servant skill seemed a likely cause.

I was a bit anxious to leave her here alone even so. I rubbed my front leg against a large tree nearby. I didn't want to use Soul Addition (Fake Life) too much, but I needed to make a bodyguard for Wight. The little treants I'd made had the Evil Dragon's Servant skill too—I could order it to protect her.

Hey, Partner. Can you turn this tree into a monster?

"Graar!" Partner nodded with a roar, dousing the tree in black light. Its bark warped, and a face appeared on its trunk. It tore its thick roots out of the ground, creating cracks in the earth. This was already different than using a sapling.

"Treeeeeeeeee!" it screamed as it whapped its two roots against the forest floor. Leaves scattered everywhere. It cost a significant chunk of MP to turn something that big into a monster, but I assumed I had enough left for it not to be a problem.

Species: Lesser Treant Status: Cursed Lv: 1/25

HP: 25/25

MP: 20/20

Attack: 15

Defense: 22

Magic: 20

Agility: 10

Rank: D

Special Skills: Dark Type: Lv — Resistance Skills: Physical Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills: Take Root: Lv 3

Clay: Lv 2

Rest: Lv 1

Title Skills: Evil Dragon's Servant: Lv —

Well, it was stronger than Wight, but I wasn't entirely convinced it would be enough. As I anxiously contemplated this, Wight tottered over and poked my leg. *What is it?* I leaned down to bring my face closer to hers. She pointed in the direction of the humans. She had been a Lithovar when she was alive; she might have instinctually sensed their presence.

"Raar." I looked over at the newborn treant. *Take care of Wight.*

"Treeeeeeee!" It understood me...right? It waved its branches around, but it didn't seem like it would attack her.

I turned and set off again in the direction of the humans. As I got closer, I could hear the Lithovars fighting a monster. A shiver ran down my spine, along with a foreboding sense of déjà vu. I quickened my pace.

"Lei, quvay, jess!"

"Ahh! Raaah! Oof!"

The humans were definitely Lithovar. There was a large man with a tall, decorated staff and the priestess woman who had come to give me the offerings. Her eyes were closed as she chanted something strange. A spell?

My bad feeling was spot-on. The man was fighting a huge scorpion-like monster—an avyssos.

"Eegghh!" The avyssos wriggled its eight long legs as it circled around the

man. Ugh, its creepy movements grossed me out so much. To my surprise, the man was holding his own against a rank C monster. He was clearly stronger than Hagen, but Adoff might have only had one or two levels on him.

“Quvay, quvay! Lei!” The priestess shouted her incantation louder. In the next moment, the avyssos disappeared. I guessed it had fled, but then it abruptly appeared behind the man. The man swung his staff around in a wide arc. The momentum of the staff smashed against the avyssos’s fangs. I was impressed by his speedy response to the whip scorpion appearing in his blind spot.

“Jess! Jess!” the priestess shouted. As though ordered, the man used his staff to attack the whip scorpion, which was now on its back. It somehow managed to scuttle backward, away from the man, into the brush and out of sight. Yuck, it moved in such a *nasty* way.

With his opponent having vanished, the man let down his guard. He stuck his staff into the ground—only for the avyssos to reemerge behind him.

“Quvay!” the woman screamed. The man hastily grabbed his staff and swung around. It didn’t look good for him. I leapt out from the forest and knocked the avyssos away with my front legs.

“Ee...gghh...” A cream-colored fluid poured from the avyssos’s mouth. Its legs roiled and flailed. It was disgusting to watch. I put more weight on my front leg. The avyssos stopped moving, only to gush more gross fluid from its back.

Gained 126 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 126 Experience Points.

I-I killed it with my bare hands. I rubbed my claws on the ground to get the avyssos’s body fluid off. *Damn it, damn it... Can’t get it off! Gross, it smells exactly like when you smash a stink bug.*

“D-Dragon God...?” The man’s mouth hung open as he looked at me. His staff fell to the ground with a clatter that snapped him back to reality; he immediately threw himself prostrate on the ground.

Th-that’s really not necessary, you know... Kinda puts me on edge, to be honest.

“O Dragon God! You came to save me!” The man stayed on the ground, bowing his head deeply. “We haven’t seen you for so long—we thought you went far away! And here you are, back again, right before the avyssos mating season... I, Valon, cannot thank you enough! I am so honored to see you again!”

Nah, I’m tellin’ ya... You’ve got the wrong dragon! Sorry, I don’t know the guy, but I’m pretty sure he did go far away. And did you say avyssos mating season? That sounds like a nightmare. Count me out.

The priestess walked over to join us. She raised her staff toward me and then closed her eyes.

(“I am Hibi, priestess of the Dragon God. I see that you have changed forms... but regardless, I am relieved you have come to lend us your power.”) The words popped into my head. She could use Telepathy! She spoke out loud when she brought the offerings, but maybe that was part of the ritual. I could understand her if she spoke out loud too, but I guess it didn’t matter so long as we could communicate. I could use Human Transformation to talk to her if it came down to it, but I’d rather not risk it. Adoff warned me that the Lithovars were dangerous, so I assumed they weren’t big fans of outsiders. Besides, that could give me up as a Dragon God impostor, and then what? They might band together and attack me.

Though I *did* save them from that monster. Should I reveal my identity now, before they found out about my secrets? I doubted that repeatedly insisting I was the dragon god would do much good after I got rumbled, so it might be better to come clean right away.

I tried to focus on my thoughts and deliver them to the Lithovars, just as I had with Ballrabbit.

Actually, the dragon god and I are two separate— “O Dragon God! We thought you had forsaken us, abandoned us! I...I...!” The muscular man, Valon, wailed and covered his face with his hands. He stayed kneeling but lifted his head. I saw from the spaces between his fingers that he was weeping with joy.

Er, no—I’m a different dragon, and...

(“Dragon God? Is something the matter?”) I heard another message via Telepathy. Flustered, I shook my head.

Valon raised his face again. His tears smeared the paint on his cheeks, but his eyes sparkled.

C-curse me for getting caught up in the moment. I quickly averted my eyes from Valon's passionate gaze.

"Valon! How dare you act so pathetically in front of the dragon god! You're making him uncomfortable!"

"But, but—!"

The priestess Hibi opened her eyes and continued to chastise Valon. She was fairly short, so it was hard to estimate her age, but, if I had to guess, I would say she was probably in her early twenties. Valon looked...mid-twenties? Definitely older than she was, but their interactions made it clear that she had the higher status. The dragon god's priestess must be a prestigious role in the Lithovar Tribe, presumably with a lot of responsibility and tribulations. No wonder she seemed more mature.



O-okay, Plan B time. No idea where the first dragon god wandered away to, but turns out I've gotta fill his paw prints. I'm sure it'll be fine. I'll gain their trust now, so it won't matter as much when they find out I'm a faker.

At a glance, the Lithovar certainly didn't seem as bad as the stories made them seem. And they liked fawning over me, which I was more than happy to oblige. There must have been some kind of misunderstanding.

I looked at Valon and Hibi, then turned my face up to the sky. Ahh, I can't help it! I'm smirking! I've gotta clean up my act if I'm gonna be a dragon god! At last, I've unlocked the protective god route! This is finally my time to shine! ... Although, Wight's waiting for me at the shrine. I should really start heading back there. I'm not sure how well her treant bodyguard would fare against a higher-ranked monster.

I went ahead and turned around.

"Are you leaving us, O Dragon God?! Everyone's in such a panic; I was hoping you might come back to our village..."

"It's my job to calm everyone down and tell them what happened! You be quiet, Valon! Stop causing trouble for the dragon god this instant!"

W-well, I would like to visit at least once, but I've got this rank E skull low mage that I can't take my eyes off of for too long. Once she gets a little bigger, perhaps...

"Did you forget the whole reason we came out here? We need to collect medicinal herbs for the traveler, who is probably still in pain!"

"B-but... Ah, you're right, Priestess..." Valon hung his head.

They were taking care of a traveler. That proved it; the rumors about the Lithovar being dangerous weren't true at all. Wait... A traveler in pain? My curiosity intensified, but...I had to go back to Wight... I glanced across to the other side of the forest and remembered how she had pointed to the Lithovar Tribe with recognition. Something was worrying me that I really wanted to address. *Hopefully it doesn't mean anything, but you never know...*

I turned and faced Hibi and Valon.

“Dragon God?”

I sent my question via Telepathy. Hibi nodded and shut her eyes.

(“The traveler is a woman who visited our tribe. She was injured in a monster attack that left her poisoned. We were gathering herbs and other ingredients to cure her,”) she answered. My anxiety worsened with every word.

It couldn’t be... But then, there was nothing to disprove it. None of my doubts could confirm my theory conclusively. Wasn’t there anything I could ask to make sure? Wait. Yes!

Where was the traveler injured? I asked Hibi, looking at her.

(“Where? Below her stomach. Luckily it was quite a shallow injury for a monster attack, but still...”)

That settled it. It was the Manticore. After I used Venom Fangs on it and it ran away, it used Human Transformation to infiltrate the Lithovar Tribe’s village. It had some nerve pretending to be an injured traveler after eating up the tribe’s children. I couldn’t let this slide—it was too dangerous. The Manticore was bound to eat more children once its injuries healed.

I glanced in Wight’s direction. *Sorry, Wight. It’s gonna take a while before I can come back. Hang on while I protect your hometown, okay?*

Valon gave me a puzzled look when he saw me looking off into the forest. He might’ve been afraid I sensed the presence of a monster. He straightened up, and Hibi frowned deeply, her eyes still closed.

Whoops, that was close. I shook my head to cover my slipup. I didn’t want the Lithovar Tribe to discover Wight yet. Hibi could use Telepathy, meaning she might pick up on any traces of my thoughts. I’d like to think that she could only read the thoughts I deliberately sent to her, but since I wasn’t the one using the skill, I couldn’t be sure. *Gotta play it safe.*

I crouched over and lay on the ground, neck pressed flat. I gestured for them both to climb up on my back.

(“Hibi. Tell me how to get to your village.”)

Hibi slowly walked over to me, but Valon stayed put. He stuck his staff in the

ground and closed his eyes, head facing forward. Was there some rule that said only priestesses could ride on dragons?

“Valon, make sure to gather those herbs.”

“Yes, Priestess! I’ll manage on my own!”

Got it, she’s delegating the responsibilities. Can Valon really take on an avyssos by himself, though?

The avyssos snuck up on its prey unexpectedly and moved quick enough that it was hard to track it. I hadn’t looked at it too closely—because it was gross—but I’m pretty sure it had some kind of stealth ability. As I wiped the most stubborn remnants of the sticky, cream-colored fluid stuck to my claws onto the ground, I thought about something. When Valon had fought the avyssos, Hibi kept yelling what at first I thought to be some kind of spell. Now I wondered if those were instructions for Valon’s sake. She got louder and more intense after the avyssos disappeared.

She must have had some kind of Psychic Sense ability. And, without her help, wouldn’t Valon be left vulnerable to the avyssos’s surprise attacks? As far as I could tell, he was only able to gain the upper hand with Hibi’s help. I would really prefer if he gathered the herbs later, especially since they wouldn’t need them at all if my hunch proved correct.

“Raar.”

“Waah! D-Dragon God? Wh-what are you...?”

Partner, who had been well behaved until now, took it upon themselves to pick Valon up with their mouth. Valon’s legs flailed helplessly as they left the ground.

Huh? What the heck are you doing?

My other head set Valon on my back and then looked at me as if to say, “That’s what you wanted, right?”

Could you do it more gently next time? Look, now there are bite marks on him! He’s not bleeding, but that doesn’t make it much better. Remember, we’re a monster, so we could easily kill a human by accident, not to mention scare one

out of their mind. Think of the trauma you might leave him with! Don't ever do that again...

“B-bite marks from the dragon god! P-Priestess! Priestess, look! It's right here, look!” Valon twisted his head to see the marks left on his side. His face was flushed bright red with excitement.

What a weirdo! Now I am kinda scared of the Lithovar Tribe. They better not all be like him. What if they start asking me to leave bite marks on them? I'll just pretend I don't understand what they're saying.

“Graar...” Partner was freaked out too, considering how they grimaced and stuck their neck as far away from Valon as they could manage.

Part 3

I RAN THROUGH THE FOREST with Hibi and Valon on my back. Hibi led the way by giving me directions using her Telepathy.

(“Cross the river and go straight. Then you should see our village.”)

I easily leapt across the river, setting the ground shaking when I landed—and scattering all the monsters that emerged from beneath the ground and within the brush as soon as they took one look at me. I sensed something creepy lurking from behind, but I didn’t want to slow down, so I had Partner check on it.

Five dwarfs, shining white, were sitting on the branches of a tree we’d already left far behind. I remembered them: They were Iaran, the monsters that Partner tried to eat earlier. They watched intently with their slightly concave eyes.

You’re not out for blood, right? Just watching me? That alone is kinda nerve-racking.

(“Gonna hit. Tree.”) Partner warned. I looked forward again to dodge the obstacle.

(“I’m sure the forest dwarfs must be overjoyed at your return. They fear the forest being disturbed,”) Hibi explained via Telepathy when she saw me glancing back at the Iaran.

Any disturbances to the forest make them grumpy, huh? According to the Divine Voice, they survive by sucking mana out of trees or something like that. Makes sense from that viewpoint that they’d appreciate a dragon god who protects the forest. They must’ve gotten curious about me when they saw me take up living in the shrine.

Things were going quite well. Besides Valon stroking my back in a suspicious way and making Partner uncomfortable, at least.

(“Don’t. Like him. Kick him. Off.”)

Oh, don’t be like that. It’s better than having someone trying to kill us. I’ve

been thrilled to run toward a human before, only for them to nearly gut me like a fish.

After running for a while, I started to get a bunch of pings with my Psychic Sense. I recognized them as human—I must be nearing the village. I slowed down and paused next to a wooden gate.

If I crouched down, I'd just barely be able to make it through. The village was surrounded by wooden fences, which were easy enough for me to step over, but I didn't want to scare the villagers by climbing the fence and showing up at their homes. *Through the gate it is.*

A man holding a spear stood next to the gate. Probably a guard.

"D-Dragon God?! P-Priestess?! What's going on...?" The moment he looked up at me, the spear dropped from his hand, and he staggered toward us.

"The dragon god is concerned about our traveler, so I brought him here."

I'm not really concerned about the traveler in the way you think... It could have been a coincidence, and I hoped it was, but the timing of someone showing up with an injury identical to that of the Manticore was way too suspicious. Human Transformation consumed so much MP that I'd discounted the idea at first, but the pieces fit together far too neatly. The Manticore must have some weird skill I didn't know about. One thing was for sure: I wouldn't rest until I saw this traveler with my own eyes.

Hibi, where is the villager? Please take any humans near her far away in a manner that won't make her suspect anything. I think she may be a monster disguised as a human.

("I see... So that's why you were in such a hurry. I'll arrange for it right away. However, the traveler is in a place with other injured villagers, so evacuating them discreetly may prove difficult.")

She jumped down from my back, bending her knees to soften the impact in a clean landing. She lightly tapped on the ground with her toes to test out her legs and then walked up to the guard.

"Goz, please have the injured people carried over to the meeting hall. Don't say a word about the dragon god. If anyone asks you why, just make up

something. You can say I ordered it if you like. Tell the traveler to stay there. If she refuses, come back here and let me know immediately.”

“Yes, Priestess!”

Goz didn’t even pick up his spear before running toward the village.

“*Graar!*” Partner picked Valon up by his head and dragged him off. Evidently, Hibi and Goz’s conversation had convinced them that there was no more need for Valon to remain here.

“Whoa!” A cloud of dust flew up around where Valon slammed to the ground.

H-hey, wasn’t that a bit much?

“*Grar,*” Partner replied, and then a ball of light enveloped Valon.

Well, at least you’re using Hi-Rest on him.

I raised my head to look at the buildings in the distance: small brick buildings arranged in a circle. Three Lithovar children hesitantly peeked out from the shadows, all standing next to one another. I crouched down low so I wouldn’t scare them. Their faces lit up, and they ran over to me.

“Dragon God!”

“Dragon God!”

“You’ve really come back!”

This whole god of protection thing seems pretty sweet. Maybe I’ll just stay here forever.

Part 4

HIBI WALKED THROUGH the gate before she turned to face me. Closing her eyes, she raised her staff.

("The traveler is in that building over there.")

I curled my body up and hid in the shadow of a building, sticking my neck out to look toward the building Hibi indicated. That was where the Manticore lurked, if my prediction was correct. I'd check when everyone else was safe outside. If this traveler was a monster, I'd smash the whole building before it could possibly resist. That was the only way to prevent further victims.

I'd have to prove it to the villagers later by showing them the Manticore's body, but I could think about that later. Wasting time on it now gave the Manticore longer to realize something was up.

An adult carried a child out of the building. The child was missing a leg. I quickly averted my eyes. Such things were inevitable when you lived near a dangerous forest. I wondered if everyone was out of the building by now. Goz was supposed to come tell Hibi when that happened, but...

"It's the dragon god! The dragon god has come to our village! Priestess, why didn't you tell me? We must tell the others immediately!" a grizzled voice exclaimed behind me. I turned to find an old woman with a hunchback.

"We don't have time right now. Please get away from this building and go to the meeting hall with the others. Tell anyone else you see the same thing," Hibi said, as she had to everyone else we came across. *She must be as worried as I am about a Manticore attack.*

"Who could possibly be more powerful than the dragon god?! How could a priestess say such a sacrilegious thing?"

N-no, that's why I'm here...

"Actually, the dragon god is..." Hibi tried to explain the situation to the old woman, but something else had stolen my attention. Something bad.

The old woman had distracted me from watching the building, but now I glanced over at it again. Three people exited it. One was the guard, Goz, another was a child, and the last was a tall woman wearing a cloth robe. Her hood was pulled down low over her eyes, obscuring her face, but I could tell by her gait that she was a woman. She had long, wavy hair, which fell down the sides of her hood.

Goz frantically pleaded with the woman about something, but she wasn't paying attention to him. I caught occasional glimpses of the hooded woman's upturned eyes, which definitely reminded me of the Manticore. Her long, wavy hair was messy and brown, kind of like the Manticore's mane. She was the traveler. It was too obvious.

So, what should I do now? This could turn into a bad situation unless I acted soon...but I wasn't absolutely certain. There was only one way to be sure.

Species: Manticore

Status: Human Transformation Lv 9, Poisoned (Slight)

Lv: 73/80

HP: 226/453

MP: 130/142

Attack: 206 (413)

Defense: 114 (228)

Bingo. My instincts had been right all along. I withdrew my neck. The Manticore's MP was nearly full, but how? I'd chosen an evolution path to get the most MP possible, but not even I could make my Human Transformation last that long.

No time to ponder that. I had to have every last one of my wits about me.

The footsteps grew fainter; I guessed they were headed toward the meeting hall. As I pondered what to do, one of the three sets of footsteps paused. The

other two followed suit. The Manticore had Psychic Sense—she had spotted me. Too late to worry about that now.

“Dragon God?”

I ignored Hibi and leapt out from my hiding spot.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaar!”

I ran. I ran as fast as I could. I charged toward the Manticore at blistering speed, long before she had any chance to strategize.

Her human guise blanched when she saw me, presumably from recalling how I knocked her senseless with my tail. She raised her arm up and her robe sleeve tore away to reveal a muscular, beastly arm. The Human Transformation had worn away on that single limb.

“Arghhh!” She punched Goz and slammed his body to the ground with her monstrous arm. When she finally stopped beating him, he was covered in blood. It looked like her claws dug into his skin with every punch.

“Wh-what’s going on?” The bewildered child started backing away from the Manticore.

“Raaaar!” I swung my arm up and shot off Windcutter.

The Manticore picked up the child using her human hand, dodging the wind blades. They grazed against her shoulder, but just barely. The blades toppled a tree behind the Manticore instead, which she glanced over to and scowled. *Bet you weren’t expecting Windcutter to be that powerful, huh?*

The Manticore grabbed the child by his neck to use as a shield as she charged for me. This was clearly a threat—if I tried to attack her, I’d hit her hostage instead. This was bad.

“Agghh! N-no! Help me...!” The child let out a strangled cry, barely able to speak as the Manticore clutched his neck.



She glared at me. Her face slowly began to change. Her hair grew wavier, her eyes more ruthless, like a wild animal's. The whites of her eyes turned yellow, and the skin around them darkened. Sharp, ferocious fangs peeked out from her mouth. She opened it wide to let out a threatening scream.

"Ke-raaar!"

With the child in hand, she ran into a nearby building. Why in the world did she do that? Her hostage stopped me from attacking her, but there was no reason for her to back herself into such a small space.

I approached the building, pondering what to do—until the wall opposite from me crumbled and the Manticore leapt out. Human Transformation had completely worn off now. She kicked bricks out from under herself when she jumped for me, her huge body soaring through the air. She hit the ground running, forelegs first.

She was ridiculously fast. And she ran at full speed because she knew well and good how powerless she was against me. I thought about chasing after her, but then I remembered the child. It took me a moment to realize why the Manticore had gone to the trouble of going into the building—it was just to buy time. And now the child was buried beneath a pile of bricks.

"Raaaaaaaaaar!" I roared and flapped my wings before launching two Windcutter attacks in the direction the Manticore fled. After a brief pause, I shot off another one. The Manticore leapt left, then right to dodge them, but the last of my attacks sliced right into her back.

"Ke-raaar!" the Manticore screamed but never lost speed. Her prickly tail slammed against the ground, using the recoil to leap high into the air. She landed atop the fence surrounding the village and demolished it, creating a perfect escape route.

I couldn't get over how fast that thing was. I should've killed her the first time, back when she underestimated me. I needed a new strategy to take care of her once and for all.

Part 5

I LOOKED AWAY from the fleeing Manticore. It pained me to admit it, but I had to let her go—again—right now. I turned and looked at the pile of rubble she left behind. The child must still be trapped underneath. I began to carefully sift through the debris.

“Raar.”

“W-waah...” I heard a cry in response. Good, he was right there, and he was alive.

I gently picked off the pieces of rubble. I could see the color of the boy’s skin peeking out from between the ruins. I glanced over at Partner.

“Graar,” they roared in response. An aura of white light bloomed around the child. His injuries healed, and as they did, the painful look on his face eased.

I picked up the boy and laid him on the ground. He opened his eyes in a squint; tears streamed down flushed cheeks. He gazed at me in complete adoration. “Th-thank you, Dragon God...”

Hot tears stung my own eyes. I wiped them away with my front leg.

“The dragon god chased away a Manticore disguised as a human!”

“Did you see how that Manticore ran away?! Thank you, Dragon God!”

The other villagers, who had been watching the whole thing unfold, began to gather around. All the people who had been in hiding quickly rushed out to see what the commotion was about.

H-hey, I’m not used to people looking at me like that. You’re gonna make me blush. Just how popular was this dragon god, anyway? Guess I’m taking over for him now. It feels pretty good. Still, what the heck am I gonna do if the superstar himself shows up?!

Hibi approached me. She lifted her staff and closed her eyes to send me a message.

("I had no idea that traveler was a monster. Who knows what might've happened if you hadn't returned, Dragon God!")

I'm just sorry I didn't kill her. What if the Manticore comes back and attacks more humans?

("You needn't worry about that. The Manticore was very frightened. She was scared of you. I doubt she'll be coming back here for quite a while. On top of which... Well, I probably shouldn't say this, but it's good that she ran off in that direction.")

What do you mean?

("It's nothing that should concern you, Dragon God. At any rate, there's no need to worry about the Manticore for a while.")

That just made me even more worried, but whatever. I was sure the Lithovar Tribe had their own reasons for thinking the way they did. Hibi certainly didn't look eager to elaborate on it.

This was no time for me to sit here and bask in my glory, though. I'd left Wight and the treant back in the forest, and a lot of time had passed since then.

"Prepare a feast for the dragon!"

"A-all right! How much food should I get...?"

"Everything you can find!"

A bunch of villagers began yelling at each other.

Hang on! I'm leaving! Sorry, but I've got other things to do! I really appreciate it, though! Hey, Hibi! Tell them I'm really sorry, but I gotta bolt!

"Whoa! The dragon god just looked at me!"

The villagers freaked out about every little thing I did. It put me on edge enough that I started to sweat. Everywhere I looked, people gazed at me adoringly.

"Graar..." Partner drew back their neck. Normally they were so happy-go-lucky and curious. I think this was the first time I'd ever seen them this freaked out.

Suddenly, I noticed there was one woman staring at me through narrowed eyes. She looked to be in her thirties. She had a dark expression on her gaunt face, emphasized by her sunken cheekbones—which might mean she was even younger than that. She stood out among the crowd of warm eyes.

The moment I made eye contact with her, she averted her gaze with a guilty look on her face and rushed into a nearby building. Amid the hustle and bustle, the others threw suspicious looks in her direction as she fled. What in the world was that all about?

(“Please don’t take it personally. I’ll have a talk with her later. Forgive her.”)
Hibi must’ve sensed what was on my mind because she sent me a message with Telepathy. I sensed the anxiety in her message; she didn’t want me to be angry.

That’s fine... Did I do something to upset her?

(“No, not at all. She’s... Well, how should I put this? She’s probably just tired. She doesn’t mean any harm by it.”)

Does it have something to do with me, though? That’s what I want to know.

Hibi deliberated for a moment over whether she should really talk about this or not. She responded, *(“Her name is Aino. Aino had a child, but...she was killed by the Manticore.”)*

Ahh. From her point of view, it probably looked like I disappeared on a whim and then waltzed back in here like nothing happened. ...And while the dragon god was away, the Manticore rampaged, took over the shrine, and ate up her child. Then I came back. I guess I wouldn’t have a very favorable opinion of me either. Could that be why the other villagers welcomed me back so warmly? Because they were afraid I’d leave again?

I looked up at the sky. *Hey, real Dragon God. Where’d you go? If you lived here long enough for them to build a shrine for you and everything, you could’ve at least said something before you left. Did you only help them out so you could get their offerings? I remember what I was in my past life, but maybe, to a real dragon, humans are nothing more than another type of animal.*

This was no time to be wallowing in my feelings. I needed to get out of here. If I didn’t hurry, then Wight...huh? Wait, could Wight be Aino’s daughter?! *N-no, I*

don't have any proof... I was sure the Manticore had eaten plenty of humans... but something about the story pulled at me.

I turned toward Hibi. She sensed I wanted to tell her something, so she closed her eyes.

What was Aino's daughter's name?

("Aino's daughter was called Allo. She was a charming little girl, not even ten years old.")

Allo, huh? If I had to guess Wight's age, it matched up.

("Dragon God?")

A-ah, sorry. Thanks for telling me. Well, I have some things I need to do, so I'll be leaving now. Can you explain it to the others?

("Are you really leaving already? I mean, you've come all the way here and...")

I nodded and turned around. There were people blocking my path, but when I gestured at them, they cleared the way. They looked kind of bummed about it, though.

I'll come back again. Once Wight's a bit stronger...

Chapter 3:

Leveling with the Skeleton Girl

Part 1

I RAN DOWN THE PATH, back toward the shrine. As I got closer to the spot where I'd left Wight, I used Psychic Sense: A strong sense of malice flared nearby that encompassed three monsters. Two of those signals were probably Wight and the treant. The other must be a wild monster... They were being attacked. Damn it. This wasn't good at all—or maybe I should be glad that I made it in time. According to what I could sense, neither side had made much of a move. It felt like they were keeping each other in check, which meant the monster was probably close to a level 2.

"Raaar!" I roared as I flew toward the three monsters, toppling trees that stood in the way of my landing. The ground shook. I was right—it was Wight and the treant. A giant, rust-colored crab faced them. It was about half the size of a human. Its shell was crusted all over with something that looked like acorn barnacles, giving it a chilling appearance. Its pincers, differently sized on either side of its body, left quite the impression too.

Judging by their formation, the treant was fighting in front while Wight stayed back to offer backup. I saw scratch marks on the treant, but Wight looked uninjured. The three of them all froze at once, startled by my ground-shaking landing.

While I could, I decided to see what kind of monster it was. If it was too dangerous, I'd go ahead and kill it on the spot. But it couldn't be that strong if the treant had already taken several hits and survived. I could intervene from this distance if need be. I just wanted to make sure the monster didn't kill Wight or the treant.

Giant Forest Crab: Rank D—. The different-sized pincers on each side of its body allow it to repeat successive attacks timed at irregular intervals. The barnacles on its body survive by imbibing its magic power in exchange for strengthening its shell. Sometimes they can't fully absorb the magic power, resulting in their death.

What's imbibing who now? Oh, those crusty barnacle things?

It didn't sound too dangerous, and its rank was pretty low. The giant forest crab took one look at me and decided it wasn't worth sticking around. It scuttled to the side in a blatant escape attempt.

Well, I wasn't gonna let that happen. Wight was only level 1 right now. I couldn't risk her dying from something like this. *Sorry, bud. You're here with perfect timing, and I'm not gonna let you escape.*

I quickly circled back. Wight stood in the way of the giant forest crab and looked at me, then nodded with a clatter. She understood my signal.

The giant forest crab moved in a wide arc that turned its body ninety degrees.

"Treeeeee!"

The treant raised its branches. The giant forest crab snipped them with its pincers and scuttled past the treant toward Wight, trying to slip past. Wight raised her arms, bracing for it as it approached. Suddenly, the wind whipped up, creating a mini tornado that picked up all the leaves and loose dirt in its vortex. The giant forest crab was right in its path.

By pure process of elimination, I figured out that Wight had used the wind magic skill Gale. The giant forest crab slashed its larger pincer toward the tornado—only for the tornado to violently dissipate.

Wight took a step backward. Obviously, she didn't have a face for me to read her expression, but I could tell by her body language that she was panicking at being rebuffed so easily. A rank D— monster might have been too much for an E-rank monster like her.

The giant forest crab dodged the vestigial gusts from the dying tornado and then raced right up to Wight. Its body tilted forcefully to one side, waving its larger pincer. Wight jumped, only to land neatly atop the pincer itself—when the giant forest crab tried to shake Wight off, she jumped again. *Guess she's super light without all that flesh to weigh her down.*

The giant forest crab changed tack and aimed its smaller pincer at the airborne Wight. It feigned a wave, stopping halfway. Wight fell for its fake-out and lifted her arm to guard herself. The crab reached out its pincer toward her

stomach. The smaller pincer could move much faster than the larger one.

Enough fooling around. I flapped my wings and gathered my magic energy. It was time for my good old friend Windcutter, which was the best skill to use here. The blades of wind were much faster than the crab, slashing through its smaller pincer. Its now pincer-less arm landed on Wight. Without it, the crab lost its balance and toppled over onto its back, legs twitching about. Game over!

Wight fell off and rolled onto the ground before getting to her feet. She looked over at the fallen giant forest crab and leaned up against a nearby tree. She must have been exhausted; a single spell was enough to deplete her MP.

“Graar!” Partner roared and the treant was bathed in healing light. Wight didn’t seem to be injured, but I approached her to make sure. When she saw me coming closer, she tipped her head to the side and looked up at me with her hollow eyes.

Call it projecting, but I could swear I sensed her relief. *There, there. You did great. And, Treant, good job at protecting Wight. That giant forest crab probably would’ve killed her if she’d been alone.*

Speaking of, I needed to finish off the giant forest crab, so I turned toward it—but it was already gone. *Huh? Did it run away? But what’s that noise?* I heard a *crunch, crunch* sound...only to turn and find Partner eating the giant forest crab, shell and all. They lifted their head, and the larger pincer fell to the ground, where it pierced straight into the earth.

N-no biggie, I just wish you’d ask me first about these things. Wight would’ve gotten more experience points if she or the treant killed it.

Gained 14 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 14 Experience Points.

Wow, I’m surprised I even got any experience points from that. I thought a rank D monster would be too low of a rank for that. It’s not much, but I guess it’s better than nothing.

I was more concerned about Wight and the treant’s stats, though. Since they had both participated in the fight, surely they must’ve gained some experience

from it.

Part 2

PARTNER LICKED THEIR LIPS and spat out a fragment of crab shell. They let out a satisfied “*Graar...*” and yawned. I turned my gaze back toward Wight, who was still sitting at the base of the tree.

Time to check her status. The giant forest crab was a rank D– monster. Wight was rank E, two ranks lower, so she should have gained a chunk of experience from it even if I had landed the killing blow.

Species: Skull Low Mage Status: Cursed Lv: 4/13

HP: 9/26

MP: 2/22

Hmm... She didn’t gain that much. *Only three levels, after all that effort?* The treant had pitched in with its higher combat ability, not to mention how Partner and I finished the giant forest crab off pretty definitively, so the amount of experience points did add up. Still, what a shame!

Wight was a low-level skeleton mage now, which made me wonder what she would turn into next. Would getting her flesh back be an option? Better than becoming a master skeleton mage or something, right?

I stared at Wight, who abruptly lowered her head. *Hm? Was I staring at her face too much?*

I couldn’t tell if she was embarrassed or just tired, what with her relative lack of facial features. I hoped she might learn to talk again as she leveled up. We could talk about all kinds of stuff, which would keep things lively. *Ah, though if she got to that point, she could just go back home to the village...*

That was my ultimate goal for her, but it also made me kind of sad. I gazed at Wight, who sat curled up in a ball.

(“Aino’s daughter was called Allo. She was a charming little girl, not even ten years old.”) I remembered what Hibi told me earlier. Allo was a little girl, not even ten years old. I wondered if Wight was really her. She looked up at me, perhaps noticing my curious expression. Our eyes met. I decided right then: I had to find out for sure. I could send her basic thoughts because I was her master, but there was no way I could convey the whole story to her that way. My only option was to use Human Transformation.

“Raar.” I asked for Partner’s consent.

“Graa?” They made a dumb noise and turned their head.

I guess asking for permission for this is kinda weird, come to think of it. Looking at their blank face strengthened my resolve. I reached out my claws and removed the spider egg sac stuck to their forehead, placing it on a nearby tree. I didn’t know what would happen if I left it there during a transformation, and I wasn’t keen to find out.

“Graar?! G-graar!”

Partner frantically stretched out their neck to try to retrieve the sac. I grabbed their neck and used Human Transformation. Heat ran through my body as it got smaller, but it barely hurt at all. I’d finally gotten used to using the skill.

“Gr-gr-gra...” Partner shrank into my own body as well, getting smaller and smaller. They glared at me briefly before they disappeared.

In my human form, I was back to only one head. I spread out my fingers and stared at my hands. Some icy-blue scales remained, but I was basically human. The first time I used this skill, it hurt so bad I thought I would explode; I’d come a long way.

I stretched a little and ran my hand through my hair. Ahh, having a human body was so nice! The one drawback was that I’d grown so used to being a dragon that my human limbs felt clumsy and hard to move. I was much closer to Wight’s eye level than before, though. She stared at me with curiosity. I couldn’t imagine she’d ever seen someone transform into a human before.

She stood up and approached me, then reached out to gingerly poke my body. Seemingly satisfied, she staggered back to sit on the ground again.

It struck me that she might be jealous. *S-sorry. I'm not trying to brag about it or anything. If you evolve about twice more, you'll look like a human too! I'm sure of it! Probably... Anyway, that's not what matters right now.*

"A-a-a... A-aah, aah..." Hey, I can talk now!

Wight cocked her head at me testing out my vocal cords.

"H-have you heard the name Allo?" Now her head swung over to the other side, like a metronome. She had Grecian Language level 1, so she should have understood that much. Had she forgotten her language? I'd have to wait until she evolved again. I decided to try asking her about her mother's name. *What was it, again...?*

"What about Aino? Have you heard that one?"

She froze. I stayed silent as her body began to tremble. Her jawbone moved three times; I could tell she was trying to repeat the name I'd said. She covered her eye sockets and curled up into a ball. I sat down next to her and patted her head.

"You're Allo, aren't you?" She didn't answer, but I thought I felt her jawbone move. *Don't worry, Wight. I mean, Allo. I swear I'm gonna turn you back into a human.*

Part 3

“G*RAAAAAAAAAAAR!*” The next morning, I awoke to a loud roar. I rubbed my eyes and stuck out my neck. The light coming in through the entrance of the temple was dim, suggesting that it was close to the crack of dawn. *C’mon, let me sleep in for two more hours!*

I glanced over at Allo, who was in the back of the shrine. I couldn’t read her facial expression, of course, but she waved her arms and legs about. She looked at me and then glanced over toward my other head.

“Graar! Graaaaar! Graaaaaaaar!”

My partner sounded half-crazed. They twisted their neck in every which way, which was when I noticed that the egg sac stuck to their forehead had split open. Eight baby spiders, each about the size of a human fist, clung to Partner’s face.

“Graaaaar!”

Hey, they finally hatched! The baby spiders were covered in green fur, the same color as their mother spider had been. *Hey, Momma, your babies made it.* I looked over at her remains, which were still in the corner of the shrine. *I really gotta give her a proper burial outside... Actually, I need to clean this whole place up.*

“Graar! Graaar!”

First, though, I should check out the babies. I focused my gaze on the spiders stuck all over my whining partner’s face.

Baby Araneae: Rank E. A furry spider. It has a lot of hidden potential but rarely grows to adulthood due to outside predators. Despite its bitter flavor, it tastes surprisingly delicious.

I remembered their mother was also an araneae. *They have a lot of outside predators, huh? Well, don’t worry. You’re stuck to someone who’s gonna take good care of you till you grow up.*

“Graaar, graaaaaaaaar!”

Speaking of which, I should step in and save them. I lightly tapped on Partner’s face. The baby spiders dropped off, one by one. Some landed on their backs, while others immediately got up and started crawling around the shrine. My partner rested their chin against the floor, exhausted.

“Graaa...” They gave a low groan and looked up at me with tears in their eyes.

I had a feeling this would happen once you stuck that thing to your head. You really shouldn’t have done it.

A noise like *kkshh, kkshh, kkshh* filled the room. I thought it was the spider babies crying, initially, but then I realized the sound came from their furred legs rubbing against each other. It sounded pretty bloodcurdling, especially with how loudly it echoed in the shrine. Any humans who struggled against E-rank monsters would be scared to death right now, even though araneae were supposed to be a mild-mannered species.

The sound of bones clattering broke through the cacophony. I turned around, being careful not to hit the ceiling, and saw that the spiders had surrounded Allo. Her neck swiveled wildly to look at the wave of baby spiders bearing down on her.

For a moment, the babies paused—then they all charged toward Allo at once, in sync. The chittering sound of their legs moving rang out in the room.

I strode over and stretched my neck out. Allo frantically climbed up onto it. I lifted my head before the spiders could follow her, and they soon lost all interest and scattered around the shrine instead. *Impulsive little guys.*

Allo trembled; she must’ve been terrified. I’d wait until the babies calmed down a bit before I put her back down.

“Graar...” Partner was shaken by the spiders too, if their strange quietness was any indicator.

Hey, you’re the one who wanted to keep them in the first place! You better take proper care of them and raise them right! I glared at Partner. They averted their eyes at once. *Y-you little...*

Not that I was convinced that Partner could take care of them. They were only rank E right now, but what about when they got bigger? Monsters grew up really fast. What if they all became rank B monsters and killed me? What if they went through a rebellious phase? I'd be done for. *Maybe we should put them back out in the wild rather than risk giving them a bad upbringing...*

Wondering what to do, I looked back at the spiders. They had gathered around their mother's body. At first it was just one, then two, and then all of them formed a tight circle around her. *Hm? What are you doing? It's not like they know to mourn her...*

Without warning, the eight baby spiders scattered again...and their mother's body was gone. I squinted and saw traces of green furry hair scattered about. *Th-they ate her. L-Listen, maybe that's normal in the spider world, and I know babies need a lot of nutrition, but...yikes!*

Bellies full, the baby spiders all piled into a corner of the shrine and fell fast asleep.

There's such thing as being too impulsive. Hey, Partner, what do you think? Are you seriously gonna keep them? I glanced over. Partner hesitantly stretched their neck toward where the spiders slept, bringing their face close.

"Graar..." They let out a sigh, apparently satisfied. Then they turned toward me.

("Mine! !! Keep them!") Seriously? You were scared out of your mind a few minutes ago!

("It. Fine! No. Problem!") Um...sure, if you say so. We'll see how it goes before I decide. Allo's freaked out by them too.

I left the shrine. As I passed by one of the trees outside, it opened its eyes and raised its roots. It was the lesser treant. It had put its roots back in the ground to rest.

What a crew. We had a wicked dragon, a skeleton girl, a cluster of baby spiders, and a treant. It was getting rowdy around here. I was almost certainly headed down the Demon King route at this point.

Regardless, my goals for today were to boost Allo's levels and gather food,

although I was sure the Lithovar would bring more offerings at some point. Something else weighed on my mind too—the Manticore that had run away yet again. She was bound to attack the village again and soon, so I wanted to take care of her before she did.

I was also dying to know what the priestess meant when she said it was better for the Manticore to run off in the direction she did. What did *that* mean? *Might as well go check while I'm out.*

Part 4

AS PLANNED, I took Allo with me to walk through the forest. I circled around the Lithovar village, making sure to not get too close, and headed in the same direction that the Manticore had used to escape. I hoped to level up Allo there and find our dinner on the way.

The baby spiders would be impossible to wrangle if I brought them along, so I had the lesser treant babysit them. I gestured my instructions, and the treant nodded blankly in apparent agreement. The spiders rushed to nest in its branches, which was a promising sign.

I scanned the forest with Psychic Sense for signs of any humans. I couldn't afford to be caught with Allo right now. Seeing a skeleton walking alongside the dragon god was just asking for a mass panic.

The Lithovar Tribe mostly kept their distance anyway, so I doubted I'd run into them...or at least, so I thought until my Psychic Sense picked up on a human presence. I had to be alert. I didn't sense any hostility or excitement that suggested they were in a fight, so I chose to avoid them altogether.

It just seemed like the best option to keep away from the Lithovar Tribe while I felt out the priestess's claims. Hiding like this might be a bit much, but if they found me...it might get awkward. I didn't want Hibi to think I didn't trust her.

The presence had traveled to the opposite side of the village. I paused.

I wanted to fly up to check on my surroundings, but then they were all but guaranteed to notice me. What should I do? It wasn't like I was in a hurry, so I could wander around until they left. Seconds after I made that choice, I heard a nasty chewing sound coming from up ahead in the forest. Something was chowing down on meat. *Don't tell me it's the Manticore!* I gave Allo a quick glance, then dashed toward the source of the sound.

"Snort, snort...?"

A monster that looked exactly like a black pig stood in my path, next to a tree.

Excess skin sagged down to cover its eyes and obscure its lack of neck. It lifted its head to stare at me, dripping rivulets of blood from its jowls onto the blue, deerlike monster laying on the ground beneath it. The deer monster's guts were torn open.

This pig had to be either seriously dumb or way overconfident, because it made zero move to run from me.

Species: Oink-Oink

Status: Normal

Lv: 9/30

HP: 57/68

MP: 33

Attack: 32

Defense: 41

Magic: 19

Agility: 22

Rank: D

Special Skills:

Food Regeneration: Lv 1

Skin Mask: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Poison Resistance: Lv 3

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Charge: Lv 2

Bite: Lv 3

Clay: Lv 1

Roll: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Big Eater: Lv 2

Bizarre Gastronomist: Lv 3

This was *some* pig. I couldn't let my guard down—this guy had Roll! I was in the presence of a proven porcine pacesetter. All jokes aside, it was a rank D monster, with low agility and low attack to match its low level. Allo could weather an attack from it, no problem. Perfect fodder to level her up.

"Snoooooort!" The pig was suddenly enraged. It must've thought I was after its deer. *Bro, there's something way more delicious than a blue deer right in front of me! Have a higher opinion of yourself!*

I turned around to look at Allo, who nodded and walked past me to stand in front of the black pig. I curled my body up so I didn't provoke it. This was a delicate operation. If I messed up and had to intervene, Allo wouldn't get as much experience. She hadn't managed to get the upper hand with the rank D—giant forest crab, so I had a feeling she might find the rank D oink-oink similarly rough.

But this time, I'd be here from the beginning. I could put a stop to the battle if things got dangerous, which should give Allo the confidence to attack. The pig wasn't that fast, so her attacks should land with no problem. If she did a lot of damage, she'd likely get a good chunk of experience for it and, if things went really well, she could get close to evolving. Best of all would be if she earned enough to actually evolve.

With Allo in the foreground, the black pig began to get excited.

"Snoooooort!"

It kicked off the ground with its back legs. Allo held out her hands toward the pig's feet as it charged for her. Light emanated from her hands and illuminated the ground in front of the pig's storming trotters. The ground rose up. She was using Clay, the skill that she had learned when she last evolved.

“Snoort?!” The pig tripped and tumbled, ramming its right shoulder into the ground. *Awesome!* Allo had realized the pig was traveling in a straight line toward her and used it to her advantage by planting a trap. Allo’s stats were much higher, but a collision with the pig would’ve lost her the advantage. The whole course of the battle could’ve turned on her. She seemed aware of how important it was to do as much damage as possible to maximize the experience payout.

Allo held her left hand out in front of her, and with a dry *snap* her left arm fell from her shoulder and out of her sleeve. She crouched down and picked up her fallen humerus bone, which sent the remaining arm bones clattering to the ground. She swung her humerus toward the base of the pig’s right leg in an uppercut. One dull *thwack* later, the pig shrieked.

“Snort!”

Y-you’re gonna put that arm back on later, right?

Allo swung her bone from the opposite side, this time at the pig’s face—but the pig caught her bone in its mouth and tossed its head to drag her with it. She quickly dropped her humerus and took a step backward. The pig spat out the bone and rolled on the ground, fixing her with a baleful glare. The pig lightly picked up its front leg—the one Allo had attacked—and pawed it across the ground as if to test it out. It grimaced.

An injured leg was a point in our favor. Allo didn’t have much MP left, meaning she’d soon have to rely solely on her physical skills. If she could incapacitate the pig before she ran out of MP, then she would be in a much better position to clinch the battle with her fists.

That attack of hers must have cut down some HP... I checked its status.

The pig’s HP had only gone down by five measly points.

After tripping heavily over Allo’s Clay trap, getting smashed in the leg with her arm bone, and then being stabbed in the mouth, it had only taken five points of damage?! It must have been 1 HP, 3 HP, and 1 HP per attack, in that order. Battling higher-rank monsters was no joke: it had been a similar story back when I fought the Giant Potortoise and the Giant Centipede. I’d been super lucky to deliver fatal blows to both of them.

“Snort!”

The pig charged again, and this time it was seething. Its injury hadn't affected its speed, but it did noticeably sway from left to right to favor its healthy leg. Allo held her hands out to it. The pig's jowls contorted. It pushed off from the ground with all its might and leapt into the air, anticipating another Clay trap.

Smart move...but not smart enough. This time Allo wasn't aiming at the ground but for the pig itself. A tiny tornado appeared from her hands, growing bigger as it whipped toward its target: Gale. The small tornado blasted into the pig and broke apart into nothing—but since the pig was still midair, it threw it off balance, leaving it vulnerable.

“Snooort?!” The pig slammed face-first into the ground. It got up, shaking the dirt off of its face by frantically waving its head. Meanwhile, Allo collected her fallen arm bone once again and clenched it in her hand.

She was nearing her limits, I could tell. She had one-sidedly landed attack after attack on the pig, but that was while her MP held out. Now she only had half left. I wasn't sure how much more damage she could do, so I'd have to watch for when I should intervene.

The black pig's leg was seriously hampering it, though. It staggered and vaulted to the left. *That's what you get when you insist on attacking when you're injured.*

Allo gripped her arm bone and faced the pig. She sensed it too: She was almost out of MP. Her strategy would be to use her arm bone's range to her advantage, while ensuring that the pig's injury would cost it dearly.

“Snooort! Snort!” The pig leapt into the air with a powerful kick, tucking its body in on itself. It spun around and landed in a roll, speeding toward Allo. She froze, stunned, gripping her own arm bone tightly. It was obvious what she was thinking: All that effort that she'd put into attacking its leg was for nothing.

True, she wouldn't be able to attack the pig's leg while it was using Roll, but that didn't negate her hard work. The pig was cornered, and using Roll was its last resort. Roll was pretty strong—it raised both your attack power and speed. I would know; I relied on Roll for a lot, back in the day. But that was also why I knew Roll's biggest weakness. You were limited to a straight path ahead; you

couldn't make sharp turns. No matter how much faster you were than your enemy, they could take you out as long as they knew that.

The pig sped toward Allo, who backed up along a diagonal path to stand next to a tree. It followed her. Allo reached her hand out again, creating a small tornado. She was trying to use Gale to throw the pig off its path and make it slam into the tree. She backed up diagonally like that to lure it in the right direction. Allo had figured out how to handle Roll. *Great job, kid!*

My excitement was squashed when Gale didn't affect the black pig's Roll at all. The pig closed in on Allo as her tornado fizzled into nothing. She quickly retreated behind the tree.

Nice choice. It would be tough for the pig to use Roll from there. Or so I thought—the pig dropped its speed to go around the tree instead. Allo was a sitting duck. The pig knocked her backward so that she fell to the ground. When she tried to get up, she faltered partway through and crumpled back down to the earth again.

That one hit had inflicted a lot of damage on her. I could help her recover HP, but her MP was already exhausted. She couldn't last any longer. It was my turn to take the stage.

The black pig skidded across the ground, losing speed, tanking its momentum. It approached Allo, dragging its right foot across the ground.

"Graaar!" Partner roared, shrouding Allo in black light. Soul Addition (Fake Life) recovered her HP. *Nice going. Allo, hurry up and get away from that pig!*

Instead, she stood up, grabbed her arm bone, and whacked the pig with it.

"Snoort!" The pig was ready to finish Allo off, but it ended up taking the brunt of her attack head-on. Once it was thrown off balance, she whacked it again.

"Snnrgh!" It was a clean attack, landing right across its head. The pig staggered and quickly backed away, dodging Allo's third attack.

A-Allo? I mean, you're doing a great job but don't overdo it, okay? Your MP's basically at rock bottom right now. You're gonna get yourself killed!

Once the black pig put distance between itself and Allo, it rolled back into a ball and charged. She hunched over and stretched her arm bone out in defense.

Then she thrust the bone forward in a stabbing motion.

“Snnrrr!”

But its Roll skill didn't lose its momentum. It smashed into Allo, sending her arm bone flying from her hand. It struck the earth shortly before the rest of her did. The pig aborted its Roll and flopped over, only to immediately spring back up, eyes glinting with fury.

Allo crawled on her stomach, using her one remaining arm to scrabble upright. Either she was just too weak or she'd used up all her stamina, because she couldn't manage to stand.

Y-you're still trying to fight? At least the pig also seemed to be at its limits. If she had enough stamina to fight, another boost from Soul Addition (Fake Life) might do the trick.

“Graar!” Partner roared, and, once again, Allo was bathed in black light. She stood and pulled her arm out from the ground. All she had to do now was knock her foe out. The black pig sprang forward, and Allo countered, swinging her arm bone to strike it. Every time she took damage, Partner healed her. This process repeated a few times until finally Allo's arm bone broke.

“S-snooort...” At the exact same moment, the black pig collapsed to the ground. Allo had managed to take down a monster that outranked her! She must've gotten a lot of experience points for that one. So long as Partner and I were supporting her, she was bound to level up in no time at all!

...And then Allo staggered and crumpled to the ground. Her neck slumped to the side as if it were broken. She stopped moving. *W-well, maybe “no time at all” is a bit of an exaggeration.* We *did* help her keep moving with the recovery magic, though. That method wouldn't have worked on a living human.

I gently touched Allo's head with one of my front legs. *There, there. You did a great job.* Her head swiveled in my direction with a creak.

Species: Skull Low Mage

Lv: 13/13 (MAX)

HP: 26/47

MP: 3/44

Nice, she maxed out her level! Now she can evolve. That hopefully meant taking one step closer to restoring her humanity. I bet Allo was desperate for that to happen.

I gulped. I mean, I *hoped* she'd get closer to being a human. I wasn't sure what I'd do if she turned into some kind of giant skeleton monster instead. Last time, she evolved from a wight to a skull low mage, and, honestly, the only thing that changed was that she became a skeleton that knew a bit of magic. *She better start inching closer to being human instead...*

"Graar! Graar!" Meanwhile, Partner wanted to eat the pig.

Can't you at least use Soul Addition (Fake Life) on Allo to make her evolve first?

Partner glanced over at me, then silently stared at Allo. Sensing that Partner wanted something from her, she sat down on the ground.

"Graar, graar!" Partner urged me to hurry up. I poked its neck with my head. *"Graar!"*

Food can wait! Allo worked really hard for this! I tore my gaze away from Partner's pout and looked back over at Allo. She stayed crouched down, unmoving, her head hunched over. Her arms and legs dangled toward the ground. She was completely exhausted.

She's not gonna move until you finish eating. See how courteous she is compared to you? I glanced back over at Partner, who continued to gesture at the pig with their chin. *Ooh, you big...jerk! You don't have an ounce of compassion, do you?*

I couldn't afford fighting with them, though. I needed Partner to use Soul Addition (Fake Life). I relented and walked over to the pig. I focused my Scorching Breath on its carcass, roasting both it and the surrounding grass; the latter turned black and then shriveled into ash. Smoke rose from the pig's body.

The aroma of the roasted meat tickled my nostrils. I couldn't help drooling.

Hey, Partner. I think I'm gonna have a little bite of this...

Partner grabbed the pig's belly with their mouth, lifted their head up, and gulped the whole beast down in one bite. The pig's bones crunched as they chewed. They spit out part of its skull. Using their tongue to clean the leftover meat from between their fangs, they glanced over at me as if to say, "Did you say something?"

You bully...! Well, you'd better be in a good mood now. Allo saw that Partner was finished eating and slowly stood up. Partner, suddenly all business, stretched their neck out toward her.

"*Graar,*" they roared. A black light covered Allo. They wasted no time in using Soul Addition (Fake Life)...and now Allo would be able to evolve. Unfortunately, I had to put my excitement on pause when I heard a sizzling sound, like smoke hissing.

Wh-what's going on? Should I do something to help?

"...Ah..."

A low, hoarse voice came from within the orb of black light. Allo was a skeleton, so she shouldn't be able to talk. Partner and I cautiously observed as the black light receded, giving way to a humanlike figure. From its height and the battered Lithovar Tribe clothing, I could tell right away that it was Allo. Her newly grown hair covered her eyes, dry and stiff, as if it had no moisture whatsoever. What little of her face that I could see was the same color as the earth, as were her arms and legs. Her skin seemed fragile, like one touch would make it slough off. She wasn't just bones anymore. She had flesh. It didn't seem like rotten flesh either—more like dirt. Allo reached up to touch her hair, then brought her hand up to her face.

She froze and kept staring at her own hand. It must have shocked her to see flesh. Despite her thin skin, she was a lot more human than she had been before. Allo opened and closed her mouth. She was having difficulty speaking.

Name: Allo

Species: Levana Mage

Status: Cursed

Lv: 1/30

HP: 50/50

MP: 3/48

Attack: 15

Defense: 12

Magic: 20

Agility: 11

Rank: D

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 1

Undead: Lv —

Dark Type: Lv —

Body Morph: Lv 4

Resistance Skills:

Debuff Resistance: Lv —

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Gale: Lv 4

Poor Curse: Lv 3

Life Drain: Lv 2

Clay: Lv 5

Regenerate: Lv 1

Clay Doll: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Evil Dragon's Servant: Lv —

All of her skill levels had gone up. She even gained one Special and two Normal Skills. I recognized Regenerate, but Clay Doll and Body Morph sounded a little sketchy. I wanted to learn more about her new evolution, so I pulled up her status.

Levana Mage: Rank D. A levana that can use magic at will.

It's said that if you ever encounter one of these monsters, you should kill it immediately, because it has the power to create allies.

K-kill it immediately? She's already dead... Yeah, there was no way I could let anyone else see her yet. What was a "levana," anyway?

Levana: Rank D— Monster.

An undead monster that magically arose from the earth. Its flesh is comprised of dirt.

Those with a strong desire to have living flesh may evolve easier than others.

Hm, I see. I figured it had something to do with dirt, which made sense if her flesh was created from the earth. *A strong desire for living flesh, huh? That sounds pretty brutal. I should probably think this over.* But it was too late for second thoughts; I'd realized that a long time ago. It was my fault for having Partner use Soul Addition (Fake Life) in the first place without knowing what would happen. That was why I wanted to turn Allo back into a human: to make up for my mistake. I understood what she was going through—after all, I knew how lonely it was to suddenly wake up as a monster one day. Maybe it was my own selfishness that caused this. My own self-satisfaction.

Allo was one step closer to being human again, but I had a hunch that she was on a dangerous evolution path. One wrong move, and I might turn the Lithovar Tribe against me. Allo saw my reaction and gave me a puzzled look. A few crumbs of dirt fell from her neck. *Don't worry, Allo. I'll protect you no matter*

what.

Chapter 4:

Another Village

Part 1

ALLO WAS HAVING SOME difficulty moving post-evolution, so I decided to delay our journey for a bit and watch over her. The problem seemed to be her imitation body, which was made out of dirt. Every time she bent her joints, powdery earth sprinkled to the ground.

She was a rank D monster now and, having had experience leveling Ballrabbit up to rank D, I knew it would be a slow, demanding process to raise her ranks from here on out. Heck, it had taken *me* a lot of experience points, and I had the benefit of a specific goal to motivate me as I ground levels.

Still, in just that one jump from E to D, Allo went from being a complete skeleton to having a physical body...well, a fake body made from dirt. The Divine Voice said the levanas were undead monsters who yearned for their own physical bodies. I hoped that meant Allo was on the undead path and on her way to becoming human.

“Ahh... Ahh, ooo...” A hoarse voice interrupted my train of thought. I turned my gaze toward Allo. She’d been practicing how to move her joints around and seemed to be making progress: She could walk a little less awkwardly now. After I made sure she could get around okay, we got back on the road.

I skirted around the Lithovar village and headed back in the direction of the Manticore’s exit. Hibi had implied that it was for the best that she had left that way, indicating that she had some idea of where it had gone.

That made me think that the Manticore must’ve headed in a fairly straight line. If I kept going this way, I might run into her. I paid attention to Psychic Sense while I walked. The thick grass blotted out a lot of the tracks, but many of the trees around here had scratches on their trunks. Psychic Sense was my only hope for gathering clues.

Traveling in a vague general direction wore on me. I hated the idea of letting the Manticore escape again. After I’d walked some distance without picking up on anything, I tried putting my nose to the ground to sniff out any scents...no

dice. All I could smell was dirt and flowers. No Manticore.

I had no idea where I was going, so basically the farther I went, the more disoriented I got. *Might be better to put off the search for the Manticore until I get Allo up a few more levels, make her stronger. If I can't find her right now, that's that. Should I just go home? Hibi did tell me not to worry about it...*

I hadn't worked out a way to get a hold of the Manticore even if I did find her. She was way too fast for me, and a single misstep might accidentally drive her back into the village.

I paused and glanced behind me. Allo staggered to and fro as she followed me. I looked at her face. Her expressions were still fairly static—probably because her flesh was made of literal dirt—but she seemed unsettled. Her eyes darted around like she was nervous about something. She had reacted to her mother's name, which meant she remembered her past life. Did she remember whatever lay ahead? We were pretty far from the Lithovar village and there were monsters out here, so I couldn't imagine Lithovar children like her were allowed to wander out this far.

Keep going...or go back? When I looked ahead, unable to decide, I spotted three tiny figures like lumps of clay, sitting side by side on a tree branch. There they were again, the forest sprites, the laran. They really were everywhere in this forest.

One made eye contact with me. At least, I assumed it did. It was tricky to tell where their eyes were. It gestured as though it were scratching its head, its attention fixed upon me. It stood and grasped the branch upon which it sat, and then hung down from it. What the heck? Weird behavior, no doubt about it. The other two didn't seem to care.

It swung once, twice, three times, and then jumped straight down, leaving a little cloud of dust in its wake. Once that cleared, it slowly stood up and began walking in the opposite direction. It took about three steps before it vanished into thin air. I glanced back at the other two laran, but they were missing from the branch too.

It felt like they were telling me to follow them. No, that wasn't it exactly. More like, "You can come, but only if you want to." I had a strong feeling that

was it.

I-I guess I'll go as far as I can. It felt like the Lithovar Tribe was hiding something from me, which made me anxious. I wanted to clear that doubt. I went in the same direction as the laran walked before it disappeared, but I couldn't see it anywhere. Did it just run away? Then I noticed something: I couldn't hear Allo's footsteps. I turned to see her standing still, looking around with caution.

I focused my energy on Psychic Sense and tried to expand its range. There was a human presence a short distance away. It could be a traveler who had wandered into the area...or a member of the Lithovar Tribe.

They were pretty far from the village if they were the latter. That, and they knew that was the direction the Manticore had run off in. I doubted that anyone from the village would come out this far to go hunting. So, a traveler? Why would someone travel out here alone?

I was itching to check it out, but I couldn't let anyone see Allo. While deciding what to do, my Psychic Sense pinged another human presence. I was getting flustered already, but then there was another ping. And another. In the end, my Psychic Sense radar detected five humans in all, in three separate groups. Two were alone, and there was one group of three. Had they split up to search for something? They didn't seem lost. From the vibes I picked up, they had a good lay of the land. *They've gotta be Lithovar.*

The group of three suddenly stopped. The person at the front of the group began making their way straight toward me.

Ahh, crap! Busted! Guess I'm not the only one with Psychic Sense here. Should I run away? Nah, I should really find out who these people are.

If they were from the Lithovar Tribe, chances were that they wouldn't attack me if we ran into each other. I wanted to know what they were doing so far out here, but that meant hiding Allo...

I cranked up Psychic Sense to try to get a better idea of the groups movements. At first, only one group was heading for me, but now the two solo humans had also changed course toward me as well. They must have sensed me at the same time. Something about their movements bothered me. They

must have some way to communicate with each other. Not only Psychic Sense, but a telepathic skill that worked across long distances. I thought about Hibi, the priestess. She'd sensed where the avyssos was during the battle and shared the information with her friend. She could speak to me using Telepathy as well. Was she here?

I turned my head in the direction of the signal. Allo looked at me and began to fidget. She must've guessed that something was coming our way from my reaction. But why would that make her panic?

She could be upset because we couldn't let any humans see her like this, but I suspected there was more to it than that. Allo must know this place. She'd been on edge ever since we entered the area. Hibi told me that I didn't need to worry about the Manticore anymore, because she ran off in this direction. The Lithovar Tribe must know what was beyond this point to say something like that.

I decided I would hide Allo and see what was up. If they were hostile, five humans weren't going to beat me. All I had to do was give them a good scare and run away.

I opened my mouth and looked at Allo, who paused in confusion. She seemed to understand my gestured question: "Can I hide you in my mouth?"—although she gave it some thought before she nodded. I didn't need to read her expression to know she wasn't crazy about the idea. *Sorry, Allo.*

"*Aah! Aah!*" Partner opened their mouth and crowed loudly, as if offering to do it for me. I quickly took Allo in my own mouth. I didn't trust Partner not to swallow her whole. Meanwhile, I felt Allo's dirt-flesh wetting and breaking down from my saliva, sticking to the inside of my mouth. A smell that reminded me of mulch flooded my sinuses. Yup, this girl was definitely undead. I wondered if that was why she hesitated; she might be shy about how she smelled.

I shifted my focus back to Psychic Sense. The group of humans were closer now, surrounding me from three sides. They stood in place—and then they ran at me as one.

Not so friendly after all, huh? And now I had to fight with my mouth clamped

shut so that no one would see Allo. I was afraid that their Psychic Sense would alert them to her, but at least she wouldn't read as human.

A whooshing sound sliced through the air. I swung my tail and batted down their arrows...most of their arrows. I turned to squint at my back. A broken arrow sat there, black liquid seeping out of it. Poison.

Mors Poison (Modified): Value: C+. Poison from mors, made from boiling several types of poisonous plants together. It is often used by forest tribes for hunting purposes.

Tribes who live in the forest, huh... So, in other words— An arrow shot past, this one from a different direction, and interrupted my thoughts. *Sorry, but no matter how poisonous those arrows are, they're not gonna penetrate my skin.* They were too slow anyway. I swung around and batted the arrows down.

"Graaar!" Partner used Bellow. It wasn't to threaten the humans or buffet them back, rather to express their general discontent at being attacked.

Two half-naked men appeared, carrying spears. The fabric and pattern on their clothing looked like the Lithovar Tribe's. They grasped their weapons, and, as they slowly approached, I saw that their eyes were full of hatred.

What the—why are they attacking me?

"G-go back! We were only supposed to make sure it was him!"

I heard a voice from behind the two men. It was a girl holding a large staff. She wasn't Hibi, but she was dressed just like her—a dragon god priestess. She must be the one with the Psychic Sense and Telepathy. *Hm? But if she has Telepathy, why did she just talk out loud?*

The girl aimed her staff at me. Without warning, a blast of intense light shot in my direction.

"Raaar!"

"Graaar!"

Dammit. The priestess shouted to draw my attention so she could blind me. I heard Partner bash their head against the ground. That skill was designed to rob opponents of their sight, and it was extremely effective.

Gained Resistance Skill “Blinding Resistance” Lv 1.

Resistance Skill “Confusion Resistance” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

Another resistance skill. Awesome, but personally, I'd like to never experience this one again. I squinted around to no avail and resorted to Psychic Sense instead. The five humans were gone. Chasing after them wouldn't be hard, but my heart wasn't in it. I had no idea why members from the Lithovar Tribe, who worshipped dragons as gods, would suddenly attack me.

Were they doing something they didn't want me to see? No, this second priestess had said they were supposed to “make sure it was him.” Then...had they never seen me before? I certainly didn't recognize them.

They ran off in the *opposite* direction of the Lithovar Tribe's village. They attacked a dragon god, who they were supposed to worship. And Hibi had said it was for the best if the Manticore ran in this direction...

Had the tribe split into two factions? They must be sworn enemies if they had—one side sent a monster to attack them, the other shot at an object of worship with poisoned arrows. What was I supposed to do about it? I never dreamed I would be sending the Manticore running toward another human village. Were they pissed off about it? Was that why they attacked me?

Part 2

ONCE THE HUMANS LEFT the field of my Psychic Sense, I lowered my chin to the ground and opened my mouth. Allo crawled out. She fell off my tongue and rolled onto the ground. Her body was a melted mess, presumably from my saliva. Her skin, made from dirt, didn't hold up well against liquids. I kinda wanted to rinse out my mouth too.

"Raar," I said to her, as she unsteadily rose to her feet. I glanced in the direction in which the humans had run, then back at Allo. I tried to tell her I would go that way but that she should hide until I returned. She got the gist of it, it seemed, but she kept her eyes trained anxiously on the floor.

I needed more information about this other faction of the Lithovar Tribe, if that was what they were. Hesitant as I was to make any more blunders, it *was* my fault that I'd chased the Manticore off in their direction. Even if I'd had no idea at the time.

I had to be cautious. Still, I hated the idea of leaving Allo near a human village. ...But the Manticore would claim more victims if I stood around doing nothing. I had to act as soon as possible. I'd come this way in the first place to take care of the Manticore, and now that I knew where she was, I needed to settle this once and for all.

I looked back in the direction the humans had escaped. That must be where I'd find that other faction of the Lithovar Tribe—and the Manticore. As much as I'd like to go into the village and talk to the villagers, they'd just attacked me. I couldn't risk looking like a dragon around them.

Human Transformation was my only hope. My Automatic MP Recovery skill was at level 6, which bought me around an hour of human-form time. That was plenty of time to figure out what was going on. I'd disguise myself as a traveler, then head toward the Manticore still in human form—just like the Manticore had done, when she faked being human to deceive the pro-dragon faction. Those guys had offered medical treatment to a stranger, so I hoped this faction

might be similarly friendly to outsiders.

Plus, appearing in front of the Manticore in human form might let down her guard. She would probably try to run away again if I showed up as a dragon, but if she saw a human she might think her next meal had just shown up. I'd wait until she relaxed and then deliver the fatal blow, finishing her off once and for all. Third time's a charm. No matter what, I was going to kill her.

Unfortunately, I'd have to enter the village naked. There was nothing I could do about that. I could tell them I was bathing in the stream when I was attacked by a monster, so I had to run away.

Allo stared at me but then glanced in the direction of the other tribe's village. Then she looked back at me and nodded.

"...Ave...il...age..." She opened and closed her mouth. It was very difficult for her to talk, and, once she was finished, she collapsed in a painful-looking coughing fit that sprayed lumps of dirt from her mouth. Her throat was in no condition to talk properly yet.

I'd barely heard her words, but I could make a good guess.

"Save the village."

"*Raar.*" I answered, then left her there.

I had thought that Allo was from the dragon-worshipping faction of the Lithovar and was opposed to the other faction, but I was wrong. I supposed if anyone was opposed to the other faction it would've been her parents. She was a kid; she probably couldn't tell the difference either way.

Worried that someone might find her, I kept checking back over my shoulder. She sat in the shade of a tree, but every time she saw me turn and look, she stood up and waved at me with both hands.

I widened the scope of my Psychic Sense and searched for the anti-dragon faction's village. I heard rushing water from the nearby river, so I walked that way through the trees, assuming the villagers would live close by. The river was wide, with plenty of space for me to move. On the opposite bank, I found tattered clothes and a splintered wooden bucket discarded on the shore. More good evidence supporting my hunch.

Just as I considered crossing the river, I noticed my reflection in the water. My plan was to use Human Transformation to lure the Manticore in, but I recalled that Manticores, or at least this one, preferred to eat female children. The first child I saved was a little girl, and so was Allo. I was an adult male in my human form.

At least I'd be more tempting as a human than as a dragon, but—wait! There wasn't much I could do about my size, but my gender was a different story. The Manticore wouldn't be as cautious with an unfamiliar woman as she would be with an unfamiliar man. The same could be true for the villagers.

I glanced over at Partner.

"Graar?" They gave me a puzzled look, tipping their head to the side. I thought back to the Divine Voice's explanation of my new species.

Ouroboros: Rank A. A dragon with knowledge of eternity that runs contrary to the logic of this world. Does not age. A double-headed hermaphroditic dragon. Its existence itself is said to symbolize both eternity and taboo. Defies God in that it controls magic that desecrates life.

Possesses bottomless HP and MP. An expert in recovery magic.

That's right—I was a hermaphroditic two-headed dragon. That could be interpreted to mean that the two parts of me were two distinct genders. And since I was a male, that meant my other head could actually be female.

Their speech via Mutual Understanding always sounded a bit masculine to me, but that could be because they imitated how I spoke. I'd never given it much thought before, but it was worth a try. If it worked, I'd have a much better chance of both defeating the Manticore and getting information from the anti-dragon tribe.

I explained my plan to Partner.

"Raar, raar."

Now, listen. I'm going to turn you into a human. If things go well, we're going

to go to the anti-dragon village and get information from the people there. But you have to behave! I'll give you instructions. All you have to do is follow them.

"Graar!" ("Okay! Leave it. To me! I'll. Do it!")

They were oddly enthused about the idea, which made me more anxious. Should I go after all? Nah, it wasn't a bad idea to experiment with Human Transformation. Sure, it would eat away at my MP, but Automatic MP Recovery would kick in when I was done and replenish what I'd lost.

All right, here we go. Ready? Partner quickly nodded as if to say, "Hurry it up already!" *I mean, I'm glad you're curious, but...*

I used Human Transformation. Heat raced through my body. Then my body shrank, as if it were melting away. This was it. I pushed down my own head as much as I possibly could.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

A searing pain raced through my skull. *It hurts! It huuurts! Are we sure this is a good idea?!* Last time we used this skill, Partner stopped screaming eventually. My head sank into my shoulder. *This will go back to normal, right?*

My vision dwindling, I somehow managed one last look over at Partner. Their face looked more like a lizardman than a human, but I had to trust the process and let Human Transformation do its work. All my senses ceased as I melted into the heat.

Then my vision gradually returned. Blurry at first, like looking through a kaleidoscope, but growing clearer by the second. Strangely, I couldn't move my eyes. Nor could I close them.

What happened to Human Transformation? I tried to lift my hand, but my body refused to comply. Instead, my hand moved of its own volition and covered my mouth.

"Graaaaawwwn!" I let out a loud, dragon-like yawn...in a high, soprano-type voice.

Oooh, I get it. Partner has control now. We were sharing our five senses somehow. And my hunch was proven right—Partner *was* female. Well, strictly

speaking, we usually shared a body with all that entailed; but in her human form, she was decidedly female-shaped. Damn, this was confusing.

“Aah, aah, ahh! Ooh, ooh! I can talk! I can move my arm! Holy crap, this is amazing!”

Hey, you can understand language? That made sense. We shared all of our skills, anyway. *Although I’m sure there are a few exceptions.*

“Holy crap, holy crap! But...this doesn’t seem like my body!” Partner started smacking her hands against her shoulders and thighs.

I didn’t care about all that—I just wanted to look at our reflection.

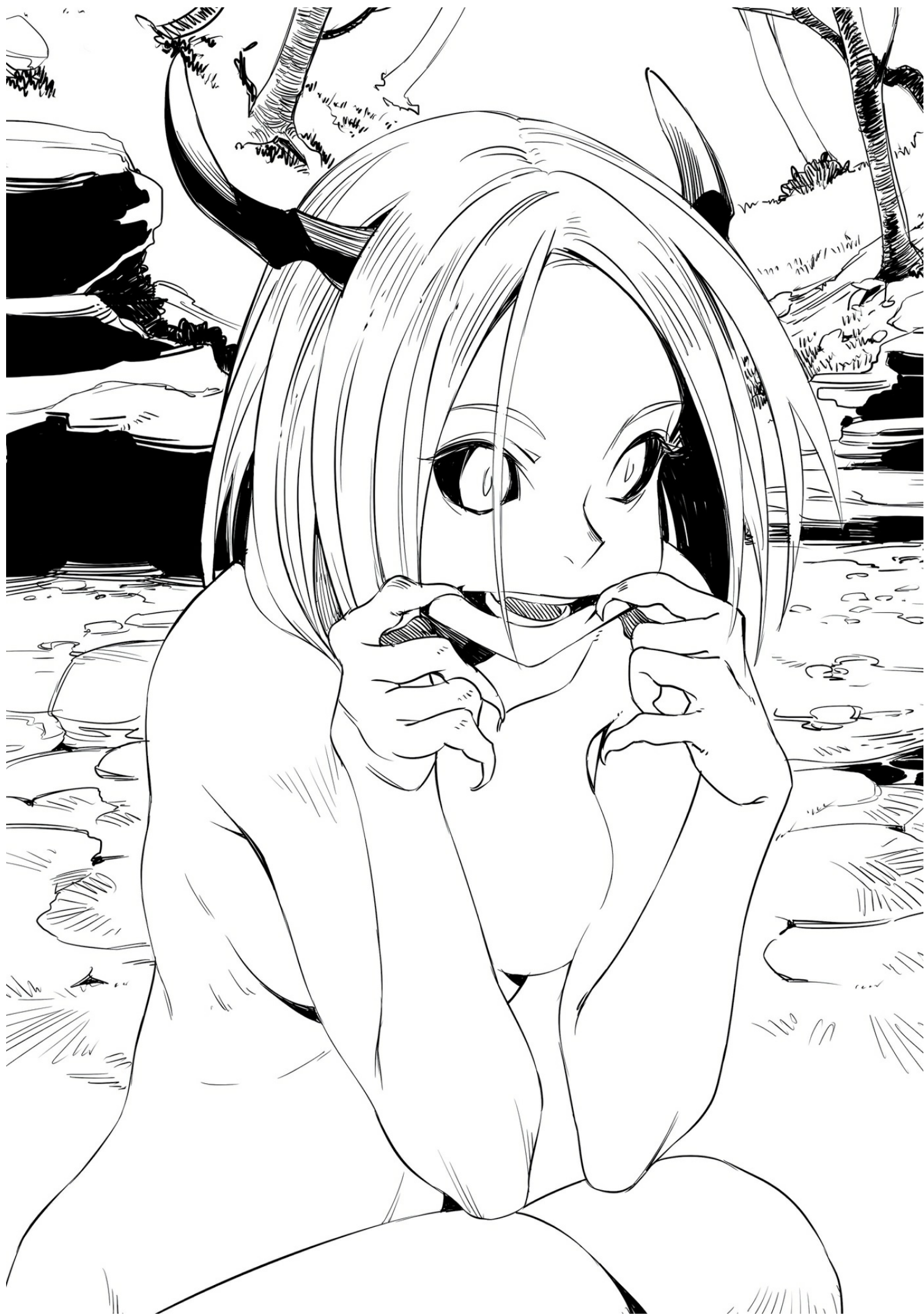
“Graar!” Partner responded shortly. We peered into the river. She was shorter than I was when I used Human Transformation, maybe 160 centimeters. Her skin was very pale, with visible patches of dragon scales left over here and there. Two horns grew from either side of her head.

Hmm, those horns and scales worried me. Would the Lithovar Tribe overlook stuff like that? They took in a Manticore disguised as a human and gave her medical treatment, so our odds were good. And in the worst-case scenario, we could always run away. My stats were halved while transformed into a human, but I felt confident that I could hold my own against a gang of villagers.

Our face looked human enough. The eyes were big and round; the proportion of the nose and mouth was good. Her body was more slender than my usual human body. Between her slowness and her round eyes, she looked pretty young. And...definitely what I would call beautiful. If not for the horns and the scales, I wouldn’t hesitate to tell her to go and get the information for me. No way would they turn her away.

Though...I felt hesitant to even look down at her soft, feminine body. The idea of having her go to the village like this felt...embarrassing.

“Graar! Gaa! Gaaa!” Partner lowered her face toward the water. She opened her eyes wide and pinched her cheeks.



Hey, Partner. Remember those tattered clothes we saw? They're better than nothing. Go put those on.

"Nn..." She picked up the clothes and shook the water from them. It was a struggle, but she managed to put on the abandoned Lithovar clothing. I heard a few rips in the process but chose to ignore them. She peered down at the water again, twisting her body every which way to check out her clothes.

Enough of that. We gotta hurry. We can only stay in human form for an hour, so we gotta get in and get out. Those people left their bucket here, so the village must be close... They wouldn't go very far from home to wash their clothes. We'll get there quicker if you run. Let's say...fifteen minutes to get there, thirty-five minutes to talk to them, and ten minutes to run away at full speed. Got it?

"Graar?" Partner tipped her head to the side.

Don't sweat it, I'll keep track for you. Just hurry up and get to the village. There's bound to be a trail that leads there, so keep your eyes peeled.

Partner started running. It became immediately apparent how unused she was to having human legs—she weaved wildly from left to right. I wanted her to go faster, but there was no sense in forcing her at this point.

A few minutes later, my Psychic Sense detected three humans. It was one of the groups that had run from me earlier. Partner didn't notice, so I clued her in on their number and location.

Special Skill "Mutual Understanding" Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

Sweet, it went up! Communication between us had been relatively smooth, but if things could be even more convenient in the future that was all the better. Partner wouldn't have to take much initiative to pick up information from the tribe, especially if she forced it out of them. *It's all up to you, Partner. I'll think of what to say and all you have to do is play it cool.*

"Graar!"

And if there's any kind of argument, don't fight with them. Let's choose running away over violence. We could deepen the rift between the factions if we mess up here.

As we followed the group of people, I picked up on several more ahead. We must be almost on top of the village, confirming all my theories. *Time to go see for myself.*

I used Mutual Understanding to give Partner instructions, and she obeyed. *We're almost there, and then it's all up to you, Partner. By the way, if you get hungry or thirsty, don't you dare steal from the villagers. I promise I'll give you a feast later.*

"Yeah, yeah!" she answered, humming as she made her way through the forest. She wasn't nervous at all, which was great—I just wished she'd do something about the way she talked. *Interesting philosophical question there. Can I even fix that about her, when she is me?*

The group of people didn't react to our presence at all. They were the same people we'd encountered previously, I was sure, so the priestess with Psychic Sense must have been somewhere else. Or maybe we were so humanlike that we no longer showed up on her radar. Even if we did ping her Psychic Sense, she wouldn't suspect another human so close to the village.

Listen, Partner. Even if they act hostile, don't attack them, no matter what. Don't try to bite or punch them, even if they're wrong. We're way stronger than they are, so it'd be easy to accidentally end up with a pile of bodies. That's what I'm most scared of. If you really think you can't hold back anymore, tell me. Then we can run away at full speed to cool your head or stop using Human Transformation.

"Quit worryin' so much, jeez!"

Can you blame me?! I don't know what kind of people are in this village. We have to plan for the worst-case scenarios.

"Why the hell're you goin' out on a limb for these punks if you're scared stiff of 'em?" Partner seemed completely unconcerned. Did she not understand the risks? Whether or not she did, she was having too much fun to care. "What's the big deal if we eat the food those humans brought, or go out huntin' sometimes, or raise a bunch of spider babies 'cause we're bored?"

Well, uh, none of that is a big deal...but I can't help being concerned. My partner's attitude skewed much closer to a real dragon's than my own. She ate

whatever she wanted, when she wanted, and her constant curiosity reminded me of how a wild animal would act. Or a wild monster, in her case. She was willing to cooperate for now, but I was afraid a time might come when our opinions would clash. Then what?

“I was just talkin’ out loud. You don’t gotta think about it so much. This body is yours.”

So you’re actually gonna obey me at this point? That’s a relief. Still, I felt a little guilty about it. I was sure Partner was so excited because of how refreshing it felt to move our body on her own. *I should give her more opportunities to use Human Transformation, I guess...*

The group of three drew near, then paused. Maybe they heard Partner’s footsteps or her humming. When she squinted, I could make out the humans’ silhouettes in the distance. They were returning our stare. *All right, Partner, you’re up. The second anything weird happens, run for it.*

Partner nodded silently. Was she afraid they’d hear her talking to herself? It was a good sign—she was trying to be careful. *Now, what should I have her say first?* Telling them she was a traveler would be a good start. The Manticore did that to get into the first village. Would it be faster if she pretended to be injured to garner their sympathy? No, they’d figure out that she was faking in no time. Any minor injuries she did sustain would heal on their own with our automatic recovery skills.

Fine, we’d go with the story about having her river bath interrupted by a monster attack. She could say she lost her bag and needed food. She was pretty and frail, so she didn’t look like a physical threat. I didn’t expect that the villagers would be too cautious of her, especially since she was obviously unarmed.

We had about fifty more minutes of Human Transformation mode left. If the information gathering felt like it would take more time than that, we’d just have to find a chance to run away. *Hey, Partner. Play up the fact that you’re just a traveler and that you don’t pose a threat to them.*

“Graar?” I felt the muscles in our face tense up. Sweat streamed down our cheeks. She must have been too nervous to figure out exactly what to say.

Maybe I should have been the one to transform after all. *Just, uh...y-you know! Make it clear that you're friendly. I'll tell you what to say.*

The trio came close enough for us to make out their faces. They were all half-naked, muscular men. Two had bows, while the one in front held a spear. The man with the spear lowered his weapon when he caught sight of us. The tension in his face eased.

"It's a woman. Unarmed. Put down your weapons," he ordered. The other men lowered their bows.

"Perfect timing."

"Yeah."

The two men with the bows were whispering to each other.

Perfect timing? What does that mean?

"Hey, pipe down. I'll do the talking." The man with the spear glared at the other two. They jolted, standing at attention, and shut their mouths. "Why have you come to this forest, girl?"

"Um. I'm...travel...ing," she stammered. She was definitely nervous. The two men in the back narrowed their eyes suspiciously. I thought we might be in trouble, but then the man with the spear glared at them again, and their poker faces returned.

"How many of you are there? Where are your friends?"

Friends... Of course. There was no way a girl would come to such a dangerous place alone. I thought about the two adventurers who came to my cave so long ago. This place was a hundred times more dangerous. You'd need a party of at least eight to make it here because of the avyssos alone. If, say, a lone girl and her partner showed up, you'd naturally want to find out how powerful they were.

"Um, I-I c-came alone with my p-partner..."

Hopeless. This girl was totally freaking out. She was taking whatever bits and pieces flashed through my thoughts and running with them.

"There's only two of you?" The man with the spear frowned and scanned us

up and down.

Uh-oh, now the leader's suspicious. I know! We can pose as a white mage! I remembered that had been Myria's single Title Skill. White mages specialized in recovery magic, didn't they? If they asked us to prove it, we could cast Hi-Rest right away, and, if we played our cards right, they'd even owe us for the favor. They'd feel more at ease if they assumed we weren't very good at physical combat too.

"I-I might not look like it, but I'm an accomplished white mage."

Right, good, a-and, um...and say your partner died. They'll get suspicious if they think he's off wandering around somewhere.

"My partner...uh... He was eaten by, like, a huge bug and died."

You're already bringing up the avyssos?! You were really traumatized by that thing, weren't you?

"An avyssos, huh? Sorry to hear that. You must be exhausted. Come with us to our village." The man dropped his suspicions all at once.

Huh? W-well, I mean, we'd really appreciate that. Our story really wasn't that believable, but...whatever.

Her beauty must have clinched it. These guys looked like tough bruisers, but I guessed they were actually a bunch of flirts deep down.

"Come with us, girl. We'll take you to a safe place in the forest after you have rested." The man with the spear turned and started back toward their village. *What's with this pretty boy, anyway? I mean, it's fine to be a good person or whatever, but this is how the other Lithovar let a Manticore in!*

The two men with the bows stood frozen, but, once the other man passed them, they exchanged glances and covered their mouths. One called after him.

"H-hey, Yarg..."

"It can wait. I said I'd do the talking. Keep your mouths shut till we get back to the village."

Yarg must have been the guy with the spear. His companions scowled, apparently dissatisfied with his orders, but when Yarg walked off in silence, they

quickly followed after him.

“Hurry up, girl. If you keep dawdling like that, the avyssos will return to gobble you up.”

This tribe was no fan of the avyssos, I could tell that much. The forest must be crawling with them. I’d be happy if I never saw one again, but it sounded like that was too much to ask for.

“R-right...” Partner nodded awkwardly, and we followed after Yarg too. Honestly this seemed a little sketchy, but I had no reason to abort the mission. Getting into the village was the whole idea from the start.

Part 3

WE FOLLOWED YARG for a few minutes before we came to the entrance of the village. At the gates, Yarg signaled with his hand, and the two men with the bows ran off somewhere. They were probably telling the priestess or whoever that I was here.

This village was in far worse shape than that of the pro-dragon faction. The houses were sparse, and I didn't see many other people walking around. On top of that, the houses that did exist sported broken-down walls and entrances burdened with overgrown grass. They were obviously abandoned.

There were also overgrown crop fields, neglected due to an assumed lack of labor hands in the village. Sticks marked specific crops in the fields, but even they looked worn down. I guessed it had been years since those fields had been maintained.

The few people who lingered here and there looked at us and conferred in whispers, but no one approached. Some didn't look thrilled to see us, but others seemed unexpectedly happy. It was hard to tell how they really felt about me being here.

Something did strike me, though, and that was that every single person I spotted was male. Did they have some tribe rule that forbade women from walking around alone? Nah—that couldn't be it. I'd seen their priestess.

"You're not hurt, are you? Oh, I guess you wouldn't be, what with your healing magic."

"Gr-gra—"

You can't say "Graar," Partner!

Partner chose silence over another attempt.

H-hey, say something! Anything except "Graar."

"Still pretty shaken up, huh? Feel free to relax and let yourself recover," Yarg said with a brisk nod.

Ever since arriving in the village, Partner had been as docile as a house cat. She didn't seem likely to try and get us in trouble, so I thought she might be in a state of shock from being in her human form in unfamiliar human territory. Bad as I felt about it, I was also kind of relieved. *Keep your guard up, Partner. These guys are the anti-dragon faction, so it won't be pretty if they find out our true identity. I mean, that and the village itself is kinda—no, totally—sketchy! Let's get the info we need and then hightail it outta here before something goes wrong.*

Finally, we reached a building located on the edge of the village. It was a veritable mansion compared to the others.

"We have to let the chief know you're here. Got it?"

Partner nodded silently. The chief was in the back of the house, sitting on a rug, surrounded by young women waiting on him on either side. Deep wrinkles lined his face; I figured he must be in his fifties. He seemed in good shape, but something was off—his eyes were constantly roaming around.

"We have a visitor, Chief Nagrom."

"Ho-ho, ho-ho! Is that right? Very good, very good!" Nagrom got to his feet much more swiftly than I would've expected for his age. He pushed the women aside and came over to me. His wrinkles folded in on themselves as he gave a truly terrible smile.

Ugh, this old geezer's breath stinks! Partner felt about ready to cry. *Th-this is the tribe's chief? I mean, it's not nice to judge someone by their looks, but still...*

I had a time limit. I really needed to get my questions answered—about the Manticore, this tribe, and their thoughts on the other faction—then scram. And, ideally, I'd like to pump this old geezer for the answers here and now so I could get away with plenty of time to spare. Any unexpected tangents that came up along the way would only eat up time.

I felt Partner's frown with my face. *Hey, I know how you feel, but you can't let it show. Pretend, will you?*

Nagrom was about to take his seat again when Yarg spoke up. "She's a traveler who was passing through the forest when her partner was killed by an

avysos. She still seems to be quite shaken up, and..."

"Ho-ho, ho-ho! Sounds like quite a rough time!" Nagrom interrupted, nodding emphatically.

Hey, this old goat isn't even listening! Yarg didn't seem particularly bothered, which implied this must happen a lot. It might be difficult to get any information out of this chief. Faster to regroup and ask Yarg instead, by my estimate. It wasn't like only the chief held the answers to my questions.

"U-um, ahh..." Partner tried to say something, but she got all tongue-tied. *Try, dammit! C'mon!*

"She's having trouble with her throat. Oh, are you thirsty? How thoughtless of us... Koren! Go bring her some water!"

The woman clinging onto Nagrom's right arm slid away at the order. *Wow, this dude is incredible.* He screamed in her ear, and she didn't even bat an eyelash.

("Hey...I can't really...do this. Anymore.") Partner sent me a message via Telepathy. Talk about weak.

Don't worry! Drink some water, then we're gonna get outta here. Then we'll talk to Yarg, and you can run away as fast as you can!

("Fine.")

Yarg answered some of Nagrom's questions while Partner silently shrunk back. I began to wonder if there was even a point to having her there in the first place.

Nagrom kept peering creepily at Partner's tattered clothing. *Nasty old fart...*

"Chief Nagrom...?"

"Hrm, hrm. Oh, I wondering what's up with her clothes. Looks like old Lithovar robes."

Nagrom quickly made an excuse when Yarg tried to chide him. *This geezer has too much power.*

"They were near the river. I think she was probably bathing there when the

avysos attacked, so she left her belongings and fled. Since she was separated from her partner, she couldn't fight on her own," Yarg suggested. Partner nodded awkwardly. *Not sure it's a good idea to let him embellish on our story, but it gives her less of a chance to bungle the explanation herself.* Anyway, if other details contradicted our story later on, we could blame it on Yarg making stuff up.

"Hrm, hrm! I'll have Koren get you some fresh clothes when she's back!" Nagrom said with a cheerful smile.

Well, at least he's being nice. I'd take the clothes before we stopped using Human Transformation and then save them for the next time we used the skill. Walking around buck naked every time put us at a considerable disadvantage. *Partner, make sure you thank him.*

"Tha...tha..."

"Oh, Koren's back! What took you so long? You kept her waiting."

The chief interrupted before she could thank him or apologize. *Can't someone do something about this guy? Quit interrupting like it's going out of style!*

"Graar..." Partner let out an exhausted noise. *Hey, I told you not to say that.* She took the clay cup from Koren and then looked around like she wasn't sure what to do. She peeked inside and looked at her reflection in the water.

Just drink it already. Don't tell me you don't know how to drink out of a cup. Lift it up to your mouth and drink. It's not hard. No reason to be confused.

"Are you going to drink?" Yarg asked.

I saw the resolve in the reflection of her face. *Seriously, don't get so stressed out...*

She lifted the cup...and drank all the water in one gulp. A little splashed on her cheeks and her clothes. Such a manner of drinking did not befit a pretty young woman at all, and I hadn't expected anything like it. *Drink it slower next time...*

Yarg had maintained a poker face this whole time, but now his eyes widened. *Hey, Partner. Don't ruin our cover with something small like—wh-what?!*

A sudden, burning pain raced through my throat. My consciousness flickered.

“G-graaar!” Partner fell to her knees in pain.

Resistance Skill “Poison Resistance” Lv 5 has become Lv 6.

Resistance Skill “Paralysis Resistance” Lv 4 has become Lv 5.

Who the hell cares about that right now, damn it?! These guys drugged me! I thought I was being careful, but I’d focused too much on Nagrom.

“Tch! Spit it up! Hey, someone bring her some real water!” The chief’s smile crumpled. Blue veins bulged in his temple. *Aha, so this is his real personality.*

“I...I didn’t think she’d drink the whole thing at once!” Yarg answered.

“Koren, how much mors poison did you put in that cup?!”

“Around, um, e-eight delks or so...” Koren answered hesitantly. Nagrom’s face turned bright red.

“What do you think we’re doing here, hunting avyssos?! This is our precious human sacrifice to appease the Manticore’s anger! What are we to do if she dies here?!”

“B-b-but...I thought she’d take a tiny sip and spit it out right away!”

Of course this had something to do with the Manticore. Nagrom’s face stayed bright red as he looked away from Koren to another woman.

“Tahna, go make a strong antidote! Don’t worry about the side effects! Her sanity be damned, just don’t let her die!”

“Y-yes, Chief!” Tahna ran off to another room.

Yarg grabbed me by the shoulder and stuck his finger down my throat. “Damn it, throw up!”

“Graaaaaaaar!” Partner did not care for this foreign object suddenly being stuck down our throat. She bit down mercilessly.

“Waaaaaah! My fingers! My fingers!” Yarg hit the floor, screaming and thrashing as he clutched his right hand.

“This is no time to be joking around! Hurry up and make her vomit!”

“I-I can’t! She bit off my fingers!” Yarg stared down at his right hand. Two of

his fingers lay on the floor.

“Th-this is impossible! That amount of poison would paralyze any ordinary human!”

Partner stood up and glared at a stunned Nagrom.

“Y-you little...! Damn it! She must be a demi-human!” He grabbed a spear off the wall and aimed it toward us. “How dare you! I’m gonna kill you!”

Partner swung around, arm out—and scored two large claw marks in the carpet. Nagrom hesitated, but then his face tightened. He seemed to regain his composure, his spear grasped in his left hand while he paced around to our back.

“Yarg, don’t move! She’s strong!”

Yarg had been hunched over, poised to strike, but he fell back at his chief’s orders. Partner didn’t let that chance slip past. She kicked off into the air, using the momentum to keep Nagrom in check with her leg, then quickly swung around to kick Yarg, who tried to block the attack with his spear. It wasn’t enough. Partner knocked the spear out of his hands. She landed a hard punch to his right shoulder, sending him crashing back against the wall.

“That’s all you got? I’m not even used to this body yet...” Partner landed back on the ground and whirled her arms around as if to test the movement. Then she set her sights back on Yarg, who was still slumped against the wall, stunned. She pulled back her arm.

H-how’d this happen? Stop! Partner, stop! Sorry, but you gotta stop!

(“What?! You’re going too easy on them, Partner!”) You’re gonna cause a war between the factions if you snap!

(“It’s already way out of control!”) Not if we run away!

We’d just have to get more info from the pro-dragon god tribe and then come back here. Ugh, but then the villagers would have to live in fear of the Manticore that whole time... Who knows how many people might die while I played diplomat.

Nagrom had said something about a human sacrifice for the Manticore. I had

a feeling he intended to capture and offer me up to the Manticore as tribute.

Partner, this is real hard for me to ask you, but could you pretend to pass out? Like the poison just started working or something.

(“Are you for real right now?”) They don’t know it, but I’m the one who drove the Manticore to their village. If I’d defeated it when I had the chance, they wouldn’t have to find sacrifices. Please. I promise I’ll pay you back.

“Tch...” Partner clicked her tongue and fell to her knees.

“Th-the poison finally kicked in...” Nagrom said, relieved, putting down his weapon. “Well, all’s well that ends well. Maybe the poison was the right amount. If we had to rely on brute strength alone, she might’ve killed us all.”



The poison didn't actually work, though.

Yarg must have seriously thought he was gonna die. Wide-eyed and panting, once he saw that Partner was no longer moving, all strength left his body. He crumpled to the floor, holding his bleeding right hand with his left.

Part 4

NAGROM AND THE OTHERS tied up Partner while she pretended to be weakened from the poison. We were trussed up like a bagworm now. Partner glared at Yarg with discontent.

“Are you sure this is gonna hold?” Yarg asked, sounding worried.

“Th-that’s the same rope we used to tie up the graffant! It’ll hold... Probably. Even demi-humans are essentially human where it counts.” Nagrom seemed to be trying to convince himself more than anyone else.

Partner tensed her arms, straining the ropes as she listened. She sent me a message via Telepathy that said she thought she could bust through it, but I asked her to hold off for now.

“Still...she’s in good shape, considering how much of that mors poison she drank.”

“High resistance to poison, I’ll bet. My father always said the makeup of demi-humans was even more puzzling than monsters.”

Partner kept her eyes locked on Yarg. I shared her eyes in her human form, so I couldn’t see her expression, but I knew she was glaring. Yarg met her eyes, and his own twitched from the effort of holding her gaze. *Feel guilty, do ya?*

“Chief Nagrom, won’t we hurt the Manticore if we offer up this demi-human as a sacrifice? That might incite its rage further. Then it’ll make even stranger demands.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine, as long as she stays tied up.”

I was right. They planned on offering us up to the Manticore. The “strange demands” part made it sound like they offered her regular sacrifices so that she’d leave them alone.

Now that I thought about it, there was one pretty weird thing about finding the Manticore in the dragon god shrine—the girl wore a mask. At first, I thought that all the Lithovars must wear masks, but on reflection, I only ever saw masks

on that little girl and the people who came to present the offering.

Say that wearing a mask was meant as some kind of show of respect toward the dragon god. Why had the child been wearing one? This was a wild guess, but maybe they had their sacrifices wear masks? No one would want to stare at a child's face on the way to be sacrificed, after all. And if this tribe gave human sacrifices to appease the Manticore, maybe the other tribe did too?

In that case...it was possible that Allo had been a human sacrifice. No wonder her mother had looked so devastated, since her tribe had offered up her child to that monster. The Manticore viewed humans as a delicacy—this one liked them so much that she'd devoured the majority of this village's population, and now there were practically no children here.

All that would end today. As soon as they brought me before the Manticore, I would drop Human Transformation and kill her in a single blow.

"Graar..." Partner gritted her teeth and let out a low moan.

Listen, I get how you feel, but just...hang in there until then.

Yarg heard Partner's cry and grabbed at his injured hand as if having a bad flashback.

"Yarg, would you rather take care of the others?"

"N-no, I'm the one who brought her here."

"I see. Well, I'll leave her to you. Try not to get your hand bitten again."

Yarg's hand was in bandages, but those fingers weren't coming back. The best anyone could offer was to stop the bleeding with Hi-Rest and speed up his natural healing process.

Yarg went to the back of the room and returned with a jute bag large enough to fit a person, as well as a round mask with an animal design on it. That mask was for me. Another of my hunches was proven right.

The instant he tried to put the mask on Partner, she noisily and deliberately chattered her teeth. Yarg's shoulders jerked. He froze for a moment. *L-Listen, I get it, okay?! You gotta knock that off!*

After he'd put the mask on Partner, he placed her in the bag, still rolled on

her side. I was nervous about our time limit. We had roughly a half hour left in human form, and we needed to be presented to the Manticore before then or we'd be in trouble. If we weren't likely to make it on time, I'd have to figure out a way to escape.

Yarg picked up Partner, bag and all, and started walking. I heard chatter and the sounds of people's footsteps. After about ten minutes, I could only hear Yarg. *We must be close to the Manticore.*

"Hey, Tataruk. It's me." Yarg stopped and called to someone.

"Yarg? Who's that with you?" The voice was deep and the person spoke politely. I sensed that he was older than Yarg.

"A traveler. She's a demi-human and really strong, so make sure she doesn't get untied."

We'd made it in time. I'd have to face the Manticore with very little MP, although I thought I could defeat her if it came to a battle of blows. Especially if I surprised her...

"Do you think the other children—I mean, the sacrifices—will be able to untie her?"

"It's a rope for monsters, tied tightly by Chief Nagrom himself. Those weak girls wouldn't be able to work out those knots."

"I guess you're right."

Wha? There are more sacrifices? Right then we were set on the floor. Yarg and Tataruk pulled us out of the bag.

"In the way..."

Once Partner was out of the bag, she shook her head, causing the mask to fall off. Yarg glared at her, but he didn't seem eager to put it back on her. Now that we were out of the bag, we were able to look around. A big, rocky mountain rose before us. I saw trees at the edge of the gray rock.

I was right—Tataruk was older than Yarg. It was hard to tell by how many years exactly, but I put him around thirty. I didn't know if it was because he was just run-down, prematurely wrinkled, or too skinny, but his complexion made

him look unwell. I was sure he looked physically older than his actual age.

Yarg and Tataruk approached the mountain. Together, they moved a huge rock, revealing an opening in the ground. Tataruk peered down and shook his head miserably.

“Chief Nagrom said that since you’re an outsider, you’d be the best candidate to look after the sacrifices. That you wouldn’t have much sympathy for them... I see he was wrong. I’ll tell him you’re not suited for the job,” Yarg said.

Tataruk stood up straight and then turned around. “Th-that’s not true. You can trust me.”

Yarg gave Tataruk a suspicious look before he turned his gaze back on Partner. He placed a hand on her back and helped her stand, then took her to the opening in the mountain. “Traveler. You can hate me if you want.”

“Peh!” Partner spat on Yarg’s face and jumped down into the hole of her own volition. It was more than a three-meter drop, but she made a clean landing despite her inability to use her arms.

Hey, Partner...I’m not gonna yell at you for that, but...

“What’s the problem?”

Nothing... Actually, you did a good job holding back. I really owe you one. Sorry that you’ve always gotta do whatever I think.

Partner looked around. We were in a cave that stretched out in all directions. The ceilings were much higher down here than the entrance suggested, with a few areas where they dipped down lower, but it was still about four meters tall. The walls looked completely solid, all rock, but gaps strewn above us let in some light, so it wasn’t completely dark.

Ten little girls, assumedly between the ages of six and twelve, were tied up inside the cave. From their appearances, I knew that they were all from the Lithovar Tribe. Discarded masks, similar to the one Partner had worn, lay scattered on the ground. Only three girls still obediently wore theirs. Masked or not, they all seemed upset, huddled in one corner on a dirty carpet. Not one of them reacted. They hadn’t noticed me.

“Hey. What is this place?” Partner said. After a short pause, the girl in the front lifted her face to us.

“Did they force you to become a sacrifice too?”

“Force me? No, I agreed.” Partner’s tone of voice was harsh as she shook her head.

“Really...?” The little girl looked puzzled but didn’t say anything else.

Ugh. I was afraid this would happen, but it didn’t make it any easier. The Manticore wasn’t here—this was where they shut away the Manticore’s sacrifices. My Human Transformation was about at its limit. I could have Partner stop using it to give us a chance to recover our MP, but it’d be tough to do with others around. *Should we break the ropes and escape?*

The problem with that plan was that I didn’t know where the Manticore was. If I tried to go around looking for her, the village’s priestess would pick up on my presence again, ruining my chances of taking the Manticore by surprise.

How am I supposed to get someone to bring me to the Manticore within twenty minutes?!

Partner looked around the cave. The girls either stared at us with suspicion or were too exhausted to care. I didn’t blame them. Welcoming me into the fray wasn’t a high priority of theirs.

“Hack, hack!” As I considered my options, the girl in front—the well-spoken one that Partner talked to—started coughing. The other girls looked at her with concern but didn’t say a thing. Maybe they didn’t have the energy to speak.

There were provisions in the cave. I saw jerky and shriveled-up vegetables wrapped in dirty clothes and piled up in the back of the cave. Flies buzzed around the heap. Then there were five barrels of water but no ladles or cups. I wondered if the girls had to use their hands to scoop up the water. *Talk about unsanitary.* I assumed they scooped up the same water to wash themselves with too, on top of living together in these tight, cramped quarters. This was a guaranteed breeding ground for weird illnesses. If only I could call Ballrabbit, I’d have it use Clean on them.

I felt bad, but there really wasn’t much I could do here other than figure out a

way to escape. The girls would panic if Human Transformation wore off while I was down here, and, even more importantly, word would spread to the other guards. If I wanted to run away without anyone noticing, then I needed to do it quickly, while I had MP left.

“I’ll go tonight. I don’t think my body will last much longer.” A voice interrupted my thoughts. Partner turned her head. It was the coughing girl. She smiled ruefully as she tried to soothe the other girls.

I gathered that each night one of the girls was taken to be sacrificed to the Manticore. *Each night...?* Yeah, there was no way my MP would hold out till then.

I’d have to run away and look for the Manticore, then use Human Transformation again to catch her off guard and attack. My lack of information worried me, though. I couldn’t pose as a sacrifice to get close to it, not with my MP running out. Loathe as I was to risk letting the Manticore escape again, I was in a lousy position: behind in my plans, unfamiliar with this area, and with barely any intel about this tribe. But I needed to get the Manticore away from the village at any cost. No matter what.

Hey, Partner? I want to get some more information and then go searching for the Manticore. What do you think?

(“What should I ask?”)

The most important things are the Manticore’s approximate location and the relationship between this tribe and the other tribe. If we can just pin those down, then this trip won’t have been a waste. I’m curious about other stuff, but we can always come back later and investigate. Or we can ask the dragon priestess Hibi.

(“All right. Leave it to me.”)

That was a reassuring answer after the communication breakdown with Yarg. *Listen, if you think it’ll be too hard, at the very least just find out where the Manticore is.*

(“I-I just lost my temper before, okay?”)

O-oh. If you say so.

Partner deftly stood up, despite her restraints, and walked over to the children. She looked around at them but trained her gaze on the one that spoke to us before. I felt that she'd be the best one to ask too. She seemed smart and looked to be the oldest of the group.

"Hey. I asked you before, but what is this place? A place to shut up humans until they get to be monster chow?"

Partner had an easier time communicating than I expected. *No trouble talking to kids, huh?*

The girl looked up. "Th-this is... *Hack, hack!*"

"Yeah? What is it?"

"Hack, hack! M-my throat... Need...water..."

The girl grasped at her throat and reached for the barrel. One of the other girls unsteadily rose to her feet and staggered over, scooping up water in both of her hands for the coughing girl to drink from.

"Tch, this is so frustrating. Hi-Rest!" Partner cast the recovery spell on the coughing girl, enveloping her in light.

"Hack... H-huh? It doesn't hurt that much anymore..."

We likely hadn't cured her illness, but the girl should have regained enough of her stamina to ease her symptoms. The other girls clustered around her and patted at her in wonderment. Then they looked over at Partner, blinking.

("Now she can talk easier.") I could sense the pride in Partner's thoughts.

We're at rock bottom with our MP here. A single Hi-Rest spell doesn't use up as much as Human Transformation, but...we're running real low.

"W-wow!"

"Are you a white mage, lady?"

"C-can you heal this girl's swollen eyelids?!"

The kids came clamoring over to us. This was a dangerous place. It was hard to see where you were walking, and there were sharp stones everywhere. It was filthy too, so cuts were easily infected. The girls couldn't wash properly or

heal themselves. They probably thought Partner's magic was their saving grace.

But we'd definitely run out of MP if we healed everyone. We were already so low that Human Transformation was about to expire. *I feel awful, but we have to say n—*

"Hm? S-sure, all right. Everyone, line up," Partner said. One of the girls grabbed another girl's hand and led her to the front of the line. This girl's eyes were closed—swollen shut, I assumed—and she walked unsteadily.

H-hey, Partner! Did you hear me? You're enjoying the attention from these kids a bit too much, in my opinion! Hey! We're done here! Time out!

I had no idea what would happen if Human Transformation expired while I was still technically inside the anti-dragon village. I might single-handedly start a civil war between the tribes.

"Hi-Rest!" Partner cast the spell. The swelling in the girl's eyelids receded. Swollen parts on her body and various scratches began to heal. The other girls let out cries of wonder. The girl gingerly touched her eyelids and then opened her eyes.

"W-wow, I can see! And before I felt so cold, but now my body is warm..."

Congrats. Great to hear it. Uh, Partner?

"C'mon, next. Hurry it up before I change my mind!"

The children pushed forward at once, and my partner healed them one by one.

"Thank you s-so much!"

"Eh, it's no big deal."

"What's your, um, y-your name?"

"Pshaw, I'm nobody special."

Partner had a fan club in a matter of minutes. The dark mood in the cave had vanished; now it felt light and cheerful.

That's great and all, but you've gotten totally carried away! Time! We're running out of time! Quit acting all cool! You're smirking! I can feel it!

("I just gotta run away, right? We've still got plenty of time if I ask 'em stuff.")

I don't want any of the people from the village to see us.

("It'll be fine. All I gotta do is knock the lid off of this place, whack the guard till he's unconscious, and run away, right? Piece of cake.")

This girl really had nothing but dragon for brains. There's no guarantee someone won't follow you. Besides, we have no idea where we're going! If our MP gets too low, we'll have to wander around aimlessly, and we gotta expect the unexpected...

("I just ask them the questions and run away, right? They trust me now.")

At this point it might be best to give up on the questions and flee.

("Won't take long. Relax.")

W-well, I guess they are more likely to answer you now...

"U-um, I wonder if I could untie you?" One of the girls circled around behind us and started working on the rope. The other girls followed suit.

"These knots are so tight."

"This rope is used to tie up monsters."

"That's so m-mean! How could they be so cruel?!"

"I can untie myself, it's all right. Grrraaaaah!" Partner twisted her body and bit at the knots with her sharp teeth. She flexed her arms to loosen the binding and slashed it with her claws. After she'd weakened the rope enough, she stretched out her arms and the rope snapped, falling to the floor.

"This body's so weak..." She cracked her neck as she kicked at the remnants of the rope.

"Wh-whoa..."

"A graffant couldn't break through a rope that tough! What are you, lady?" This show of strength just riled up the girls even more.

Why do things go smoothly when you turn into a human, huh? It ends up in disaster every time for me! Well, except with the other Lithovar Tribe.

“Y-you don’t gotta freak out over it. It’s not a big deal. Jeez, be quiet!”

Watch your tone, buddy.

“Anyway, I wanna ask you something. That okay?” Partner got to the point at last. All the girls around her nodded, staring at her intently with set expressions. They were already utterly enthralled by her after only a few minutes. “There’s two villages near here, right? Tell me what the relationship is like between the two tribes.”

“Our village was made when our tribe separated from the other tribe.”

“Separated?” my partner asked. The girl nodded.

Another girl chimed in next. “Our village has worshipped a two-headed dragon for a really long time. It would come here every few decades and stay for several years. It ate up the harmful monsters around our village to protect us.”

This whole time I’d wondered where the heck the dragon god had gone off to, but apparently he would always up and leave after a few years. He’d eat up a bunch of avyssos, reducing their numbers, go off to wherever, and then toddle back when the avyssos population had grown again. Sounded more like an avyssos exterminator than a god to me, although I didn’t begrudge the humans their gratitude to him.

Still, now I was even more unsure of what went on in that dragon god’s head. Why not stay in the village forever? How was I gonna face him when he showed up again?

“The Manticore—the monster who eats people—showed up about ten years ago. I’ve lived in this village for as long as I can remember.”

Damn, that monster’s been around for a whole decade?

“About three years ago, the dragon god came back. Everyone thought we were finally saved, but the dragon took one look at the Manticore and ran away. Not only that, but the dragon god spoke through the priestess and suggested offering human sacrifices to the Manticore so we’d have as few victims as possible.”

Whoa, this is heavier than I thought. That dragon god sure let everyone down when it counted.

“Graar...” Even Partner let out a grumpy noise at the story.

Hey, be careful. Your dragon is showing.

“After that, some members of our tribe started to distrust the dragon god, so they weren’t welcome in that tribe anymore. So, they brought their families here.”

“I see...”

So that’s what happened. Now I understood why the dragon worshippers were so cold to these people and why these people don’t like the dragon god anymore. They had no choice but to begrudgingly follow the dragon god’s advice and offer human sacrifices whenever the Manticore returned.

“Someone close to the dragon priestess also separated from the tribe, which made relations between us even worse. We need people who have powers like the priestess to defend us from the monsters...”

I thought this tribe *did* have a priestess, but since they didn’t believe in the dragon god over here, I guessed the priestess was mainly respected for her ability to sense monsters. The two tribes’ priestesses dressed the same, so I’d jumped to conclusions back then.

Now, find out where the Manticore is. We’re seriously at our limit for MP. This is it, Partner. After this, we gotta run away.

It might have been better to ask for its location first, but we could’ve gotten into trouble without the full context of the situation, so I was grateful for the explanation. *Ask which direction it’s in, then get outta here.*

(“Okay.”) Partner sent the message to me and then looked at the girl in front.

“Hey. Where’s the Manticore?”

“Huh? Um, this is the entrance, so it’s that way. But, um, there’s a river and a mountain, so it’s kind of complicated. I could draw you a map...”

“Just tell me the direction.”

Ah, jeez, this sounds like a pain... I could find the Manticore using Psychic Sense if I had to, but it'd be all over once she noticed me.

“There’s a shrine my dad and the other men built to appease the Manticore. You’ll recognize it once you see it. But why do you want to find the Manticore?”

Wow, they did all that?

Partner turned to face the entrance, her back to the girls. “Hey, you guys. I swear my partner’s gonna do something to fix all this, so don’t look so sad, a’ight? I gotta get going, though.”

Then she took off at a sprint.

“What? You’re going outside?”

“Y-you can’t! Look how high up the hole is! Plus, there’s a heavy lid over it! There’s no way you can lift it from the inside!”

“And even if you *do* get outside, there are guards out there! No one can get out, not even someone as strong as you!”

Partner sprang upward with a mighty leap and kicked the rock blocking the entrance. It lifted the tiniest bit, opening the entrance by a sliver. The impact sent her slamming back to the ground.

“Owww! Damn it!!”

Wh-why? Human Transformation halved our stats, but we still had more than enough power to knock that rock into space... *Pleeease don’t tell me we’re weakened because our MP is too low. We stayed here way too long.*

“Lady!”

“Are you okay?”

“Hang in there!”

The girls came running over in a panic.

We gotta come up with a way to get outta here. I could tell from Partner’s display of power earlier that we were still stronger than the average human. *Oh, I know! There are gaps in the ceiling, right? Think you can bust through a weak spot?*

(“.....”)

Uh, Partner? Hello?

Partner lifted her arm. It trembled.

(“Sorry...I’m done for.”)

Nooooooooo! Y-you can’t!

(“I think we should stop using it... My body feels super weak.”)

I told you to hurry up and leave! Though...I’m also the one who let you stay, I guess... Ahh, what do we do?! We’re doomed!

All right, time to calm down. From what I’d learned, all we had to do was defeat the Manticore. Then this faction should stop hating the dragon god.

Guess we’ll have to turn back into a dragon and bust through the ceiling, all without caving the place in. I don’t like it, but I’ll have to threaten the guard into showing me to the Manticore. Once I get close enough, I’ll use Human Transformation to make the Manticore let her guard down. We can start from there.

I didn’t expect the guard or the village soldiers to cooperate, so this would be an uphill battle. Still, I didn’t much like my chances of beating the Manticore if I tried to do it here. I was out of good options. I’d have to lead the Manticore away from the village and hope that doing so would improve the dragon god’s reputation.

Partner. It’s time.

(“Sorry...”)

You don’t have to apologize. I was careless and made a lot of bad judgment calls too. We don’t know for sure that the Manticore’s gonna run away yet.

Partner grabbed her head and yelled at the girls, “Get back, everyone!”

Startled, the girls immediately backed away. Human Transformation wore off, and my body grew bigger and bigger. My skin hardened, and wings grew from my back. My vision cut out for a moment, but then I opened my eyes in the darkness. I saw Partner’s head next to me. *Phew, it came back.*

“Eeeeeek!”

“Nooo! Th-that lady was really the dragon god!”

The girls were in a panic. It was such a drastic change that I found it hard to swallow, even though I’d anticipated it. One girl stood there stunned, then narrowed her eyes. She scooped up a rock.

“Y-you lied to us!” She threw the rock, which hit my leg. It didn’t cause any damage. My skin was so tough that the rock bounced off it.

(“Hey,”) I heard Partner say. *(“Don’t just stand there. Run.”)*

I expected her to be the one to lose it. *Man, she’s strong.* I thought she’d be hurt at the girls’ dramatic attitude shift.

(“I ain’t as soft as you!”)

Most of the girls were bewildered or frightened of me. The rest looked at me with hatred, like the one who had thrown the rock.

It wasn’t their fault. They’d grown up hearing all the adults in their village say horrible things about the dragon god: “It’s all the dragon god’s fault,” stuff like that. They adored me a few minutes ago, though, so it did wound my heart. But I couldn’t do anything to fix it. I *was* a dragon. To a human, I looked like nothing more than a giant monster.

“Liar! Liar!” The girl throwing rocks sobbed as she swung her arm.

“Stop it!” one of the girls yelled. It was the one whom Partner had spoken to at the start, the one who had volunteered herself as the next sacrifice. The oldest one. The rock-throwing girl jolted and froze.

“B-but the dragon god...!”

“Who do you think healed us? Who healed that arm that you’re using to throw rocks?!”

“But, but...!” she protested, yet she lowered her arm. The rock tumbled to the ground. She then crumpled down after it and burst into tears.

W-wait, can I save this situation?

Part 5

THE GIRLS CALMED DOWN right away. I gave up on escaping; I'd gain more MP if I stayed put. The new plan was to save up enough MP by the time the guard returned tonight. Being the sacrifice made everything much easier: I'd wait for the guard to take me to the Manticore, where I could wait for a chance to catch her off guard. Luckily, I'd managed to smooth over the situation here, but these were kids. I doubted it'd work with adults whose minds were already made up.

The mood inside the cave was much darker than when Partner had passed for human. The children sat farther away, staring cautiously. The one girl who had stuck up for me sat the closest to me. She didn't seem threatened, but maybe she thought she had to take responsibility for speaking up in my favor.

My MP recovered as I rested. At this speed, I'd be fully recovered in a few hours. I should make it in time for the fight with the Manticore.

"O-O Dragon God... U-um, why...why did you come to this cave? You could've escaped at any time. You still, er, could..." the oldest girl asked hesitantly. I could use Human Transformation to explain myself, but I wanted to charge up my MP all the way first. She'd have to figure out why I came here on her own. Using Human Transformation to answer every question would mean not being able to use it when it counted.

Picturing the Manticore, I reached out and clawed the dirt. *Let's see... Her body looked like a lion, her face looked human, and she had a mane like this...* I drew the Manticore from memory. The lines were so jagged that it looked like a child's drawing. These claws could only do so much. Oh well.

The girl couldn't parse what I'd drawn. She frowned and tipped her head to the side. I added a tail to the drawing and drew spikes on it. Finally, it dawned on her.

"The Manticore?"

That tail was distinctive, all right. I nodded, careful not to graze the ceiling with my head. I slashed my claws across the Manticore's body, digging into the

earth.

She gasped and looked up into my eyes. Her face was full of disbelief. “You’re going to defeat the Manticore?”

“*Raar.*” I said, nodding. Her expression didn’t change. Instead, I heard her gulp. She stuck up for me, but that didn’t equate to absolute trust. It was hard to change people’s biases when they’d been surrounded by them growing up. It was okay. I was just grateful to be allowed to stay here.

Time passed.

It was a little awkward, to be honest. I lay as flat on the ground as I could to rest my body and focus on recovering my MP. Partner slept. I only pretended to, keeping my eyes slightly open to observe the other girls’ reactions. They pretended to be fine, but I was sure they had reservations. Most seemed worried about the oldest girl, who stayed close to me.

At last, the sun began to set. The light that shone in from the gaps in the ceiling took on a reddish hue. My MP reached max some time ago. Now all I had to do was wait for the guard. Then I could knock the Manticore into next week. *You aren’t getting away this time.*

I heard footsteps near the entrance to the cave above. The guard, at last. Time for Partner to get to work. *Hey, Partner. You’re in charge again for a while.*

“He’s here earlier than usual,” the oldest girl whispered.

I heard a bang against the ceiling. I looked up to see something dangling down from a gap overhead. *The heck is he doing? Is he here to save us?* The oldest girl said that he was earlier than usual. It was possible that this wasn’t the guard at all.

Wait. It took both Yarg and Tataruk to move the massive boulder blocking the entrance. Someone was trying to climb down here on their own.

I-I mean, knock yourself out...but why today?! Come back and climb down here to save the human sacrifices anytime! But why now?! Do you have to do it the one day I’m here?! I’m taking care of it! I’m gonna beat the Manticore!

What is that dopey guard doing, anyway? Isn't this exactly why people hire guards?! It's almost like someone's watching over me, pulling the strings, to get in my way as much as possible!

I used Human Transformation at once. Searing heat zipped through my body as I became smaller and smaller. I focused all my energy on my own head—this time it was naturally absorbed into my body without having to push it. My vision went dark and then rejoined with Partner's. *Hey, I think I'm getting the hang of this thing.*

Gradually, I felt Partner take over my body.

Normal Skill "Human Transformation" Lv 7 has become Lv 8.

Hey, I leveled up! Guess I did use it a ton today.

Partner touched her head and shook her neck, testing out her body. She tried to smooth out her tattered clothes. They ripped when we turned back into a dragon.

Whoops, should've taken that off first. It all happened so suddenly that there wasn't much time.

A piece of the ceiling cracked and fell to the ground in pieces. The opening grew larger. Red light from the sunset filled the cave like a spotlight.

"H-hey, listen!" I heard a voice from above. It was the guard, Tataruk, poking his head in through the hole.

It was you after all?! He was terrible at his job. But thinking about it, Yarg lectured him about exactly that: how he couldn't hack it, being an outsider, and he'd even promised to go tell the chief. Hey, you're the ones who hired him.

"All the important people from the tribe, including the priestess's kin, have retreated to the edge of the village for a meeting! They won't notice anything amiss until much later! We must get you out of here while we can!"

As soon as the girls heard this, all hell broke loose.

"B-but...!"

"Where would we go?"

They were panicking.

“Go to the other tribe! I-I just heard that the dragon god has returned!”

The girls’ heads swiveled to look at me in unison. *L-Listen, I get it, but knock it off or he’s gonna get suspicious!*

“I’m certain the dragon god chased off the Manticore and that’s why it is here, in this tiny village! Go to the other village and you’ll be safe! I was there, so I know! There’s no other reason why the Manticore would come here!”

Ohhh, so that’s what they meant by “outsider.” He left the pro-dragon tribe and came here!

“I can’t say the same for adults, but they wouldn’t let children like you die! I know you must be scared, but please, trust me!”

The tribes split in the first place due to this group’s doubt of the dragon god’s power. Maybe the best hope these villagers had of escaping the Manticore was to go back and return to the protection of the dragon god. Only if the other tribe allowed it, of course.

From what I recalled of Hibi’s words and how she behaved, she held quite a grudge against this tribe. No wonder the guard said they might not help adults. Children, though...

“He chased off the Manticore?”

“*The* Manticore?!”

The girls all stared at Partner again.

If the real dragon god did run away from the Manticore, then he must have known he was weaker. The Manticore charged at me when I first saw her, probably to teach “me” a lesson for coming back into her territory.

The oldest girl stared at Partner in surprise, then gasped with realization when she looked down at my scribble of the Manticore in the dirt.

“I’m lowering a rope! Hurry and climb it as fast as you can!” As I listened to Tataruk’s voice, I thought this through.

Seriously, why’d this have to happen? Escaping with the rest of them would

mean that all the effort of getting captured on purpose and staying here was completely wasted. Who knew how the Manticore would react once she discovered all of her sacrifices had escaped? The villagers wouldn't be pleased either. One wrong move here could create complete chaos. The Manticore would hear the commotion, and then escape would be out of the question.

"Why would you help us escape? Won't they just bring more children here?" the oldest girl asked, looking up at Tataruk.

He shook his head. "No, no, this tribe is already done for. The Manticore is demanding as many sacrifices as it did at the other village. In two years, there won't be any girls left!"

"N-no one ever told us that!"

"They didn't want to scare the children. Chief Nagrom even planned to kidnap children from the other tribe to start a war!"

That good-for-nothing old geezer! I know he was backed into a corner, but that's low!

"I think the Manticore came back here in the first place because the dragon god returned. And if the other village has the dragon god with them, no one from here can hurt them. This tribe has nothing left!"

The children remained silent. They were in shock. And no wonder—they'd just heard the village they'd grown up in was doomed.

Right now, everyone knew the Manticore preferred little girls, but what would happen once she ate them all? Either the tribe would die out because there were no children left or the Manticore would kill every last one of them. Neither outcome bode well.

"A-are you going home to the other village too?" one of the girls asked. Tataruk bit his lip. After a few seconds of silence, he shook his head.

"I leaked too much information about them so that they would accept me here. I told them the layout, how many weapons they have, the state of their crops..." he said, head lowered in shame. "The dragon god is merciless in protecting his village. The moment I step foot there he will burn me alive with one fiery breath to set an example."

Sounds like a pretty crappy god if he'd burn people alive...

The girls turned back to stare at Partner. Some looked ready to cry, others were terrified. Some seemed to have lost all hope.

W-wait! I'm not gonna do that! You've got the wrong dragon!

"G-graar..." Partner flinched and took a step back.

Hey. Your dragon's showing again.

"I'll stay here and beg Chief Nagrom to make peace with the other tribe. Maybe, once all of his sacrifices have run away, he'll have no other choice!"

Peace. That was what I wanted most too, but this tribe was incredibly set in their ways. I wasn't sure it would work.

"Should I succeed in convincing Chief Nagrom, he's still likely to kill me for backing him into a corner. Although, if he doesn't try to make peace with the other village, everyone will probably end up dead anyway..."

If you fail, everyone gets executed?! That's not a good plan at all! I'd rather have the old geezer die! Why isn't that an option?!

Tataruk went to all this trouble to save the kids, but he wasn't framing this well. They could sacrifice themselves to save the village or save themselves while sacrificing the village—a horrible choice to make. On top of that, Tataruk came to save them but told them that they'd need to leave him for dead too. It all left a bad taste in my mouth.

Hm? Wait a second... Could this be our chance?

Surely the dragon god had a say in the punishments of people and other major village decisions. He was the one who suggested they start sacrificing people. Tataruk even said that it was the dragon god's wrath he feared—he didn't mention the villagers.

If that was true, then the dragon god held a lot of influence in the village. I could smooth over the whole situation by suggesting both tribes reunite in the original village without penalty. I could even use the Manticore situation to urge Nagrom into making peace.

It was risky, though. If Nagrom refused my offer, it could lead to tragedy. Not

only would I have let the Manticore escape, but I'd cause a war between the two villages. Rash decisions wouldn't work here; one blunder could destroy this village. But as long as I was acting as the dragon god, I still had a chance to make things right.

Was this my decision to make when lives were on the line, though? I also felt like I'd overlooked *something* about the dragon god. I had no clue what, but something felt fishy.

"Hey, old man. Close the hole back up and stand guard," Partner yelled up to Tataruk.

"H-huh? How'd you get the rope?"

"I'm gonna be the sacrifice tonight. You're gonna act like none of this ever happened and go back to doing your job. Because I'm gonna kick that monster's butt," my partner declared as she jabbed her thumb toward her chest. Gasps came from all around us. The girls at last understood my reason for coming here.

"Th-there's no way! You've never even seen the Manticore before! A mere human can't defeat it! Hurry up and climb up! Please! The priestess's kin are very clever. Who knows when she'll start chasing after us!" Tataruk pleaded, but no one moved. Bewildered, he looked down at us. "Someone, anyone... If you don't run away at once, Chief Nagrom will declare war on the other village to appease the Manticore! There's no way Chief Nagrom can win when they have the dragon god on their side! People will lose their lives for no reason! Please, save yourselves, for the sake of the village!"

The oldest girl stood and looked at the others. Though hesitant at first, each of them nodded. All in agreement, they looked at Partner, who snorted and gave a nod of her own.

"We're not going to run away! We're going to stay here!"

"Wh-why? War will break out!"

"We believe in the dr—in this woman right here! We're gonna stay!" the oldest girl declared.

Tataruk frowned. Reluctantly, he withdrew.

Part 6

WITH TATARUK back at his post, I turned off Human Transformation and returned to my dragon form. *Gotta reserve my MP.* It was better to be safe than sorry, since I couldn't afford to lose. I lay down and closed my eyes to rest.

"Is it really you?"

"But how? Where were you all this time? Why'd you come here now?"

The girls sounded far less scared than they had been. They came up to ask me questions. *Sorry, kids. No idea what the dragon god is doing or where the heck he went.*

I opened my eyes and looked over at Partner. She looked back at me. We both shook our heads.

"O Dragon G-God," the oldest girl said. "Honestly, I'm so confused. Maybe this is selfish to ask, but...please win the battle!"

This girl was more mature than the adults in her village. Partner nodded. "Graar."

"Oh, that head is the lady!"

W-wow, you figured it out.

"Graar." Partner made a happy noise.

The red light from the sunset seeping into the cave gradually grew weaker. Before long, darkness surrounded us, only tempered by the faint light of the moon. The girls must have been so scared and lonely down here every night in this darkness.

Just then, I heard Yarg's voice.

"Hey, it's time. Help me move the boulder."

"O-okay," Tataruk responded.

They set about opening up the cave. The hour of the sacrifice was upon us.

My time to shine. I used Human Transformation and handed the reins over to Partner. The transition got smoother each time. Fully transformed now, Partner grabbed the tattered, ruined clothing and grimaced as she put it on.

It was only then that I noticed that we were still untied. If Yarg saw that we had gotten free, he might suspect something. He was bound to have lasting trauma over losing those fingers. *A-at the very least we should tie up our arms.*

“H-hey. Help me tie up my arms.”

“Huh? Okay...” The girls looked puzzled but all gathered around Partner, who turned her back to them and crossed her arms. The girls managed to tie her arms with the rope. The knots were weak and unconvincing, but it was better than nothing.

I kept listening to the conversation between Yarg and Tataruk overhead.

“You look pale, Tataruk. I knew you weren’t cut out for this job.”

“Um, the meeting—what happened?”

“As if I’d tell an outsider like you.”

“B-but...” Tataruk objected—and then I heard a sharp noise. “A-argh!” I heard Tataruk fall to the ground. Yarg must have whacked him in the face with the back of his spear.

“What, are you planning on going back to your old tribe and begging them to take you back now that there’s danger on the horizon? Do you think your own life that valuable? You’re shameless, Tataruk. Otherwise, you never would’ve changed tribes after all this time.”

“N-no, I...”

I felt Partner’s eyebrow twitch. Tataruk was willing to sacrifice himself to save the village *and* lead the sacrifices to safety. Hearing someone accuse him of shameless cowardice felt awful.

“This is your last day on the job. I have my orders from Chief Nagrom not to kill you, but I don’t trust you. You’re a traitor to your village. Who’s to say you won’t betray us? I wouldn’t even trust you to guard the village perimeter.”

Tataruk didn’t reply.

“I’m gonna climb in and get tonight’s sacrifice myself. You wait here,” Yarg said coldly, then threw a rope down the hole. As soon as Partner saw it, she leapt toward the entrance.

H-hang on, what’re you doing?!

She kicked off the wall and jumped, then used the opposite wall as a second launching pad. She shot out from the hole without any need of the rope.

“Wh-what?!” Yarg, who had been peering down the hole, was so startled by Partner’s parkour that he leapt backward. Partner did a somersault and kned him in the face. “Oof!” Yarg staggered and fell to his knees. He grabbed his nose and gave Partner an unbelievably hateful glare.

P-Partner...

“I went easy on you, so don’t come cryin’ to me about it! You’re the one who poisoned me!”

If you screw this up, it could ruin my whole plan! I get that you hate the guy, but knock it off! He doesn’t know all the stuff Tataruk was saying!

“H-how’d you get untied?”

“Oh? What’s the matter? I thought you were gonna make me a sacrifice!”

“Y-you little—!” Yarg stood and grabbed Partner’s shoulder, trying to wrestle her down. She dug her heels in.

Stop, stop! I know you hate his guts, but you really need to calm down! If you get into a fight right now, the only ones who’ll suffer are the girls!

“...Tch.” Partner relaxed and fell to the floor.

“Haah, haah... Don’t have the energy to keep fighting back, huh?”

Oh, we’ve got plenty of energy...

“Wh-what’s wrong, Yarg?”

“I’ll take her. If I can keep her in check right now, she won’t have the strength to anger the Manticore. I wanted to save her for last to weaken her, but...she’s creepy. Kicking off the walls and leaping up here, untying herself... We can’t leave her in there any longer. She’ll escape. She needs to be sacrificed now.”

Uh-oh. His original plan was to save Partner for last, so her ridiculous behavior had actually worked in our favor. *You can kick Yarg more if you want.*

“Really?”

Sorry, I was joking. Don’t take me seriously. I forgot that you’d actually do it.

Yarg ordered Tataruk to tie our arms up with a new rope. He couldn’t tie knots as well now that he was missing some fingers. Once Tataruk was done, Yarg grabbed the rope and started pulling me in the Manticore’s direction. Tataruk walked behind us, spear pointed at the back of Partner’s head. He held a lantern in his other hand with a glowing stone inside of it.

That kick must’ve rattled Yarg. Every now and then, he reached up and protectively held his nose. Tataruk gave Partner an uneasy glance, which she returned with a glare until he looked away. “We’re almost to the Manticore’s lair. It knows that we come every night after the sun sets. It’s probably waiting there for us, already drooling.”

There was no guarantee that it would stay in one place all day, so the priestess’s kin must have used Telepathy to negotiate with it or something. I was certain the Manticore would be lying around, relaxing, totally vulnerable. It would be worth the wait.

“Hey, Tataruk. No unnecessary talking.”

“S-sorry...” Tataruk apologized when Yarg glared at him. Then he looked back at Partner as if asking, *“Do you really think you can take on the Manticore?”* Partner ignored him and let Yarg keep dragging her along.

At last, we arrived at the mouth of a large, natural cave in the side of the mountain, much like the one in which the other sacrificial girls were kept. This one was much bigger and deeper. An etching of a Manticore decorated the wall near the entrance, like a cute decoration to appease what lurked within. Tataruk had told us the truth.

Yarg stopped at the entrance and glared at Partner with narrowed eyes. He seemed suspicious that she wasn’t putting up more of a fight, and I couldn’t blame him, thinking about her behavior thus far. She’d bitten his fingers off, kicked him, and smacked him in the nose.

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

“You’re acting strange.”

“Would you rather I struggle?”

Yarg frowned before looking down at his injured hand. His face didn’t show it, but I thought he might be recalling the pain of having his fingers bitten off.

Tataruk held up the lantern for us as we walked farther into the cave. I would never have guessed this place would be so big. It was like a gigantic, never-ending maze. It would be easy to get lost in here with no hope of escape.

Suddenly, we heard a loud noise coming from the back of the cave. It sounded like something getting up. Then came the loud, monstrous footsteps.

“The Manticore’s coming,” Yarg murmured. His voice trembled. He was scared. Tataruk took that precise moment to run for Yarg, throwing his lantern in the air and jabbing his spear at Partner in the process.

“T-Tataruk, what are you—”

“Get back, Yarg! Move!” Tataruk threw himself against Yarg’s shoulder. Yarg staggered and let go of Partner’s rope. Tataruk swung the tip of his spear at her bindings. Partner jumped backward to avoid it.

“Ahh!” Tataruk wasn’t expecting that, and so he fell to the ground. In his eyes, he’d put his life on the line for one last-ditch attempt to save Partner before the Manticore arrived. But, from our perspective, we wanted to catch the Manticore unawares at all costs, which meant staying tied up. We could free ourselves at any time.

“Tataruk! What the h-hell are you thinking?! Knock this off immediately!” Yarg bellowed as he stood up.

“Huh? Ah, no, I, ahh...”

Yarg glanced between Partner and Tataruk in obvious confusion.

“Hey. Should I have let him do it?” my partner asked me.

N-no, I think you did the right thing. You had no other choice.

I sensed her pout, but there was no time to soothe her. A familiar monster

emerged from the back of the cave.

“Ke-raaaaar!” Her monstrous yet feminine face slowly peered out from the darkness. Her long mane rippled behind her, the wrinkles on her hideous face deepening as she smiled. *At long last, we meet again.*

Her body was intimidatingly large compared to a human one, her beastly face terrifying. The claws sprouting from her feet could skewer a human with ease. She was pretty spooky at first sight, from a human perspective. But I had seen her before, and she didn’t scare me.

The Manticore drooled when she caught sight of us. Yarg ran about ten paces away from the Manticore and announced, “W-we’ve brought your sacrifice!” He sounded as if he were begging for his life.

Partner glared at the Manticore and then grinned confidently. She stretched out her hand and snapped her fingers. Her arm was tense. It felt like she could knock the Manticore out in one blow. “Can I let loose now?”

H-hang on! At least let me check her status before we start! Better safe than sorry! I’d really rather catch the Manticore off guard if we can. Don’t do anything to make her suspicious of you!

“You’re always so careful.”

Oh yeah, and aim for her legs! Then, even if we mess up, she won’t be able to escape!

“Tch. All right, I got it.”

Listen, I know you wanna jump right into this, but she’s escaped twice already. It can’t happen again. This time we’re gonna kick her butt.

All right, now to check her status...

Species: Manticore

Status: Normal

Lv: 73/80

HP: 453/453

MP: 128/142

Attack: 413

Defense: 228

Magic: 194

Agility: 534

Rank: B

Special Skills:

Nekomata: Lv —

Undercover: Lv 4

Psychic Sense: Lv 6

Grecian Language: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 4

Magic Resistance: Lv 5

Fire Resistance: Lv 3

Poison Resistance: Lv 2

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

Paralyzing Claws: Lv 7

Paralyzing Bite: Lv 8

Human Transformation: Lv 9

Sandstorm: Lv 6

1,000 Needles: Lv 9

Surprise Attack: Lv 7

Title Skills:

Cunning: Lv 6

Tenacious: Lv 6

Chaser: Lv 9

Feline Pride: Lv 3

Swift Wind: Lv 7

Final Evolution: Lv —

Nothing too different from before. I still wanted to figure out what those Special Skills were, though. I thought they might be related to her Human Transformation skill.

Special Skill “Nekomata”

A special skill, possessed by feline-type monsters, that aids in assuming human form.

Greatly reduces MP cost of Human Transformation.

I knew it. Reduces the MP cost of Human Transformation, huh? Must be nice. Anyway, I gotta be super careful so that thing doesn't catch me off guard with a surprise attack.

“Ke-raar, ke-raar...ke-raar?” The Manticore seemed suspicious that her human sacrifice was so dauntless and filled with confidence. She glared at Partner.

Maybe you should act a little more scared. After all, even Yarg was terrified of the Manticore. No ordinary person who was suddenly dragged off to be a human sacrifice would be this calm. *Hey, Partner! At least pretend to be afraid!*

“Gr-graar...!” Partner struggled against the rope and let out a dramatic scream. She pretended to run away from the Manticore.

No, don't get too far away. And go slow. Also, not only did that scream sound totally fake, but you were speaking Dragon again!

“Ke-raaaaar! Ke-raaaaar!” The Manticore made her move. Partner paused and turned toward her, then busted through her rope. The Manticore reached out with her foreleg and whacked my partner, knocking her on her back to the

ground.

“Graar!”

The Manticore opened her huge mouth wide, making it look like a ghoulish grin lit up her face. She had us. Now we couldn't go for her legs. *Should we just transform now? Nah, not yet.* Animals were at their most vulnerable when feeding. I'd wait for my opportunity.



Partner thrashed around. The Manticore furrowed her brow. We were stuck in her grip. In human form, our physical stats were halved—we weren't strong enough.

"Ke-raaaaar!" The Manticore's jaws inched closer. Closer... Soon Partner would be in the Manticore's blind spot. *Now!*

"Graaaaaaar!" Partner yelled and swung her arm toward the Manticore's fangs. I focused all my energy on our arm. Suddenly it felt like my blood was boiling—my arm began to swell. A cloud of dust rose from the impact of my partner's fist.

Our claws dug into the Manticore's flesh. I think they penetrated her gums. My partner clawed as hard as she could into her body and yanked, hard. One of the Manticore's fangs, nerves and all, went flying through the air.

"Ke-raaar!" A scream came from inside the cloud of dust. I felt the Manticore's presence moving away. When the dust began to clear, I saw that Partner's arm was black and scaly. Just our arm had turned back into a dragon's. Part of the Human Transformation had worn off, just as intended. It was a trick I'd seen the Manticore pull off before. And now I could do it too.

Partner jumped into the air and sailed toward the Manticore. *"Graaar!"*

"Ke-raaar!"

Our claws gouged into the Manticore's foreleg and tore open her thick, furry skin. Lumps of flesh fell out. The Manticore was so startled, we were able to use that opportunity to punch her in the chin. Her large body skidded across the dirt floor.

"Wh-what?! What are you?!" Yarg picked up Tataruk's discarded lantern and shined it on my partner, screaming. I saw Tataruk nearby, his mouth gaping open in surprise.

"Oooooooooooooo!" The Manticore's eyes gleamed from the depths of the cave. She held her chin with her foreleg and gave my partner a furious glare. This time I turned off Human Transformation completely.

Heat surged through my system as my body expanded. I was back to normal.

The Manticore's anger cooled into fear. *Now you see who I really am. We have the same skill, lady! Took ya long enough.*

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

Partner and I bellowed in unison.

"K-ke-ra..." The Manticore began to back away into what Tataruk had already shown me was a dead end. If she wanted to leave, she would have to go through me first.

"I-It's the dragon god! But...h-how?! Why is the d-dragon god here?!"

I glanced behind me at Yarg. He aimed his spear—no, Tataruk's spear—toward me. However, his voice and arms trembled, so I doubted he'd try to attack.

"Graar..." My partner glared at him. He dropped his spear, then fell to the ground.

"A-ahh...ahh! Wh-what's going on?!"

Don't scare him too much.

I couldn't get too distracted by what was going on behind me. I turned my focus back to the Manticore, who froze in my sight for a moment, and then started stomping the ground.

"Ke-raar!"

A sandstorm formed and whipped around inside the cave. The only light was from Tataruk's lantern, which made it even more difficult to see in the gloom. Not to mention, the sound of the sandstorm made it harder to hear.

This version of the Sandstorm skill was much stronger than that of any of the monsters we'd encountered in the desert. It probably had something to do with skill levels, but it also made sense that it built up fast in an enclosed space like this. The Manticore must've been trying to decide whether to run or stay.

The Manticore leapt to my left, but the injury on her leg left her weaker and far slower than before. Additionally, I had Psychic Sense on my side, so there

was no way she'd get away this time. I swiveled my body and whacked the Manticore with my tail in midair.

"Ke-raar?!" She fell backward and rolled as she hit her head. I stepped forward to attack again, but then I realized she was looking behind me. Where Yarg and Tataruk still were. I froze.

"Ke-raaaaaaaar!" The Manticore stood up straight again and swung around to reveal the spikes on the tip of her tail. Was she readying 1,000 Needles? Her gaze convinced me that she had the humans behind me in her sights. There was only one way I could think of to counterattack a move like that: I had to go to the source.

I flapped my wings at top speed, bouncing dozens of the needles right off of them. Then I focused my magic onto the gust of wind that I'd created. Windcutter rushed right into the path of the needles—they fell to the ground between the Manticore and me, scattering onto the floor.

"Ke-ke-raar..."

She had tried to target the humans to distract me, and she had failed. That was her last-ditch effort. Even a Manticore had to give up at this point. My stats overwhelmingly beat her own. And, thanks to the injury on her leg, she couldn't rely on her speed anymore. I had View Status; she couldn't fool me. She didn't have any tricks left up her sleeve. The Manticore slowly got up, panting, her darting eyes bright with hate. She was looking for something, anything she could use.

"Ke...ke..." Without warning, the Manticore threw herself against the wall. The entire cave started to shake. *Don't tell me she's trying to bust a hole through the wall to escape?* No way was that gonna work. I respected her gumption, though. No wonder she escaped me twice.

I charged toward her and swung my leg upward. Game over, Manticore.

"Ke...ke-ke..."

The second I was about to knock her head off, her body shrunk. Before I knew it, a brown-haired woman stood in front of me. She dodged my claws, which landed in the ground instead.

What the hell?! She used Human Transformation! I picked up my other leg, but suddenly it froze in midair.

(“Hey! What are you doing?”) I heard my partner’s thoughts and regained my composure. I was just about to answer when I heard a voice.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” The Manticore, weak and frail-looking now, covered her face with her arm and apologized, over and over again.

She was a man-eating monster who had terrorized the Lithovar Tribe for a very long time. Not only did she attack them directly, but she split up the tribes by casting doubt on the dragon god’s powers. She grew strong off the human sacrifices and tormented everyone. She killed Allo. So then, why this? Why now...? What a coward.

At least that’s what I tried to convince myself. My legs wouldn’t move.

The Manticore was a tall, slender woman. She was weakened but still a far cry from the man-eating monster she’d been moments ago. I couldn’t help but separate the two of them in my head. My arm felt like it was made of lead.

(“Hey! Get ahold of yourself!”)

I lowered down my foreleg. The Manticore looked up at me as if she had been waiting for that moment. She was in human form, but the expression on her face was anything but—her smile was evil and cruel, while hostility radiated from her eyes.

Her mouth split wide open, signaling her transformation back into a Manticore. Digging her uninjured leg into the earth, she leapt toward my throat.

She was fast. She must’ve used all her remaining power for that jump.

“Ke-raaaaaaar!”

I fell for it. The moment I thought that, I felt the Manticore’s fangs sink deep into my neck, right beneath my chin. In a matter of life or death, a moment’s hesitation came at a great cost.

“Raar...”

My head went numb. *That’s right... She’s got Paralyzing Bite.* Damn it! I knew she specialized in surprise attacks, both from her status and from her past

behavior! Her body was still transforming back into a Manticore. Only once her transformation was complete did she let go of my throat.

Partner lunged. She bit the Manticore in the throat in an attempt to get her off of me. Her head hadn't been paralyzed! Blood spurted from the Manticore's neck as she fell back. Partner spit out another mouthful of it.

("I swear, you're always way too soft.")

...I know. I'm so glad I have you.

I pressed my foreleg against the wound in my neck to stop the bleeding and used Regenerate to heal my wounds. They immediately closed. The paralysis began to abate.

Resistance Skill "Paralysis Resistance" Lv 5 has become Lv 6.

I looked over at the Manticore. Her teeth slowly chattered...and then, at long last, she lay still.

Gained 2044 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 2044 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 61 has become Lv 65.

Finally, some decent experience.

Title Skill "Hero" Lv 2 has become Lv 4.

Wow, it skipped a level! The Manticore was definitely the strongest monster I'd faced since the Giant Centipede.

Normal Skill "Meteorite" Lv 2 and "Nutcracker" Lv 3 have become "Celestial Fall" Lv 3.

Gained Normal Skill "Earth Fall" Lv 1.

Huh? W-wait, didn't the hero have those skills? Are you sure I should get those? Will this really be okay? I'd better not inherit his terrible personality along with them. I thought back on my battle with the hero and what he said toward the end, right when he summoned the group of bugs.

"H-h-heh heh...way to...piss me off. I'm done caring about this. This country can rot! I'm the only one in the world with Holy, only I can counteract a death

spell! You, Adoff, the idiot bishop, and the slave girl...you're all going to suffer and die! Why bother chasing me? You'll only regret it when you wake up in Hell!"

Could Holy cure curses? If it could, and if I could learn it now that I had the Hero title skill, the problem of the Dragon Scale Powder curse was as good as solved!

Part 7

I LOOKED AT THE BLOODY CORPSE of the Manticore and let out a sigh of relief. I was just about to turn around when I saw Yarg. He was holding his spear and looking back and forth between me and the Manticore, panicked. As usual, his grip was weak. He couldn't comprehend what had just happened, and Tataruk looked equally spooked.

I silently walked past them.

"W-wait! What *are* you?!"

Yarg yelled after me, but I had long left the cave by then.

The tribes no longer had to live in fear of the Manticore, and I had gotten vengeance for Allo. Time to go back to the other village. Hopefully, now that Yarg and Tataruk had seen me slay the Manticore, it would patch up the rift between the two tribes, but that was sure to take time. The conflict between them ran deep. Maybe I could convince the pro-dragon tribe to make the first move.

I used Psychic Sense to search for Allo as I wandered around the forest. Her presence was so unique that it was easy to spot her. She was sitting down on the ground, her back against a tree, holding a creature in her arms that reminded me of Ballrabbit.

As soon as she spotted me, she stood up and happily came over. The rabbit dropped neatly to the ground, where it followed in Allo's footsteps. It looked quite fond of her.

I-is that really a rabbit? After a closer look, I realized it didn't have any fur. In fact, it looked to be sculpted entirely from dirt. Its body was fairly fragile too, because its back leg broke off after walking only a few steps. Wait...

Levana Pet: Rank F. A catch-all term for any monster made from the earth with magic to resemble a living creature. Though individually weak, they can cause trouble because they can multiply rapidly.

Allo must've made this thing with her Clay Doll skill. *D-don't make too many of those, okay?*

She nodded and picked up the clay rabbit, petting its head. The moment she touched it, the rabbit's leg regenerated. *Aha. Well, you're the one who made it, so make sure you take good care of it.*

"You...kee?" Allo looked at me. I guessed she was trying to ask me if I was okay.

"*Raar.*" I nodded. She looked pleased.

"I...gad..." It was hard for her to enunciate, but her speech was bound to improve once she evolved again. We'd take things one step at a time. Even now, she was well on her way to becoming human.

I suddenly caught sight of those glowing green things, the laran. Three of them sat next to each other on a tree, staring at me, just like before. I really wished they'd cut that out. It made me nervous. *You guys got something to say to me? Spit it out!*

(*"I wonder how they taste?"*) Partner licked her lips. The laran must've sensed impending danger, because they stood up from the branch and jumped off simultaneously. They disappeared in midair. Damn, Partner was impressive...

Interlude:

The Noble's Tyranny Act 1

Tolemann

I HAD DECIDED to make camp so my horse could rest. I pulled out my sword and examined the blade. “Ahh, how my sword hungers for battle. I hear it now, crying out to me, ‘Kill those barbarians!’”

“You certainly look like you’re in a good mood, Your Excellency.” The pasty-faced man approaching me with a smile was my right-hand man, the mystic knight Azalea. This journey was destined to succeed as long as I had him by my side. He was renowned across Ardesia as a superlative swordsman and a peerless mage.

Azalea served another nobleman originally, but I threw my money and power around to secure him under my employ instead. I complained about that upstart of a noble, interfered with some business in his domain, and soon enough drove him to flee in the dead of the night—or, I forget, did he wind up dead by his own hand? Eh, it didn’t matter. Who cared about such details?

“It’s been so long since I killed a human... Heh heh heh... Although, they scarcely differ from beasts. Neither have morals.”

My goal for this journey was to defeat the legendary monster Carbuncle, a mythical creature with a gleaming, mint-green furry coat and a large gemstone affixed to its forehead. Stories about the creature had been passed down since an adventurer traveled near the Lithovar Tribe’s village several decades ago.

I was a nobleman with a domain in the land of Ardesia. Our king had been unable to have any more children following an illness, and his only son, the prince, died in an accident. No young men of royal blood were left to inherit the throne. Therefore, according to a very old tradition, the queen would choose a new husband from among the nobles, who would then become king.

The queen declared that she would choose whichever candidate gave her the best present—and that was how I got the idea to hunt down the Carbuncle and make a trophy of it for her. Should I successfully slay the monster, I was certain no other suitor's gift would compare.

Alas, the greatest clue to the location of the Carbuncle was also the biggest hindrance—the barbaric Lithovar Tribe. Accordingly, I brought units one through eighty from my personal regiment, whom I called “The Hungry Hunters,” to accompany me on this journey. With generally eight soldiers per unit, give or take, I'd brought close to six-hundred-and-fifty soldiers with me. Perhaps I had gone a little overboard, but I had heard tell of a two-headed dragon god who protected the Lithovars. That, plus my unfamiliarity with the layout of the village, necessitated that I bring a wealth of soldiers along to secure a certain victory.

Traveling costs for such a party were extremely high. We had to pass through other nobles' domains, even if they *were* in the middle of nowhere, and obtain permission for each soldier to enter. To this end, I promised not only to slay the mythical beast Carbuncle on this journey but to also exterminate the Lithovar Tribe along with it, as a token of my goodwill.

The nobles were less impressed by my offer than I expected. The Lithovar Tribe didn't stray far from their village hidden in the depths of the forest, and run-ins with the tribespeople were far less common than the rumors suggested. Apparently, most claims of Lithovar attacks were shameless attempts to dodge taxes to the capital or else served to stave away requests from other nobles.

In the end, I sent the nobles substantial monetary gifts in exchange for permission to travel through their domains. More work and more expenses for me, but oh well. This route took me through the same forest, meaning I would still cross Lithovar territory. I was willing to pay that price for a shot at the throne.

The captain of the Hungry Hunters' first unit was the pasty fellow I mentioned before, Azalea. He served as my bodyguard for this expedition, and since I planned on participating in the battle myself, he had his work cut out for him.

The Lithovars were strong, supposedly, but they stood no chance against my

elite Hungry Hunters. Furthermore, I couldn't imagine they had a large number of warriors at their disposal. All we had to do was take some prisoners, render them incapacitated, and then kill them all. One of the Hungry Hunters units specialized in those tactics.

Was I being too cautious of these barbarians? Perhaps. It wasn't as though I would launch an attack on them right away. I'd send my scouts ahead to investigate the tribe: to confirm how many there were, how powerful they were, and so on. Should the scouts determine that we could overpower the Lithovars, we would wait for the best timing and then burn the village to the ground.

I'd ensure that a few young girls survived—sources to torture for information about the Carbuncle—but of course, I'd kill them all once questioning was over. After that, I'd slay the Carbuncle and go home a hero, having eliminated both the mythical beast and the barbaric tribe. No one would object to my coronation as the king of Ardesia then.

"Azalea, what do you think of my plan to exterminate this boorish tribe?"

"'Tis a most impressive and clever one indeed, Your Excellency. Getting rid of the barbarians will save many lives. We'll just have to see how much information the scouts bring back with them."

"Hwa ha ha! Yes, yes! Good answer! Though, don't you think a couple of uncertainties might spice things up? We have the greatest mythic knight in all of Ardesia at my side, the Prince of Swords himself! And the Lithovar Tribe... Why, they're mere barbarians—no wiser than feral monkeys! They're no match for us!" I declared loudly. The Hungry Hunters laughed in agreement.

Azalea peered behind me and stroked his chin thoughtfully. Curious, I turned to look. One of the Hunters wasn't laughing. Sitting in a corner all by himself was Nell, a member of the first unit under Azalea's command. Two cat ears poked through his ultramarine hair.

He was a young Felis-human, one of many slaves that the kingdom of Ardesia was letting in by the droves. I had reservations about allowing one of those filthy demi-humans into my army, but he ranked into the first unit by skill alone. I didn't approve of his race, his face, nor his personality. I *especially* didn't

approve of the way he soured the mood by sitting around with such a sulky look on his face. He wasn't permitted inside my manor, of course. He'd stink up the place with his beastly stench.

Azalea went over to Nell and scrutinized his face. "Hm? What's wrong, Nell? His Excellency is trying to boost our morale, so why are you acting so cold? Don't tell me you're not feeling well?"

I rose to my feet and walked over. "Under the weather, are we? Well then, I suppose I can forgive how you ignored your great benefactor—me—to sit in a corner and sulk! Good thing too. A less adequate excuse would tempt me to tear those oversized decorations you call ears straight off your head!" I grabbed the tip of one ear and tugged hard.

"A-ah, ouch! I-I'm sorry! B-but I..."

"Oho? Well? But what? Out with it, boy! No need to hesitate!"

"No, it's nothing..."

"But there *must* be something! Don't you think so, Azalea? He has something to say, don't you think? His ears are only good for decoration. Maybe the same goes for his mouth? What a grand way to lighten up his face! I can cut them off right now for him!"

Nell remained speechless, until I took my dagger from its sheath and pressed it against his lips. His face tensed as he looked at the blade. Finally, he gulped with resolve.

"Um, see, e-even if these Lithovar people *are* barbarians, I...I don't like the idea of killing women and children... With this many soldiers, can't you just threaten them? You can still get whatever you want without k-killing them..."

"Eager to lose that mouth, aren't you?"

I forced my dagger forward against Nell's lips. When he reared back to avoid it, I used my other hand to grab his neck, stilling him. With no other recourse, he gripped the blade with his teeth; blood dripped down the dagger. Deathly pale and with tears forming in his eyes, he shook his head.

"Hwa ha ha! I was only joking! Don't understand my humor, huh?! You brain-

dead demi-humans are always killing the mood! Don't you agree, men?" I asked, and the soldiers guffawed on cue. Nell relaxed his teeth with relief. Seizing the opportunity, I kned him in the chin. Blood spurted from his mouth before he collapsed to the ground.

"Ahh! Ahhhhh!" he moaned in unbearable agony, limbs flailing.

"Are you stupid?! I already promised those idiot nobles that I'd kill every last barbarian living in this forest!" They didn't give one hoot about the tribe by my estimation, but I'd given them my word. All the money I'd spent would be for nothing if I messed this up.

I looked down and wiped a finger across my chest. Seeing Nell's blood stain my clothing, I spat upon the ground.

"That demi-human has soiled me with his blood! Someone, come and wipe me!" I said. Azalea immediately rushed over with a cloth. He was so prepared that it was almost like he'd predicted this would happen.

"Shall I heal Nell?"

"W-well, er, he is here to fight, so it would be a shame not to use him for that. Let him die on the battlefield."

Chapter 5:

Attack on Avyssos

Part 1

THE MANTICORE DEFEATED, I returned to the dragon god's shrine with Allo. An unfamiliar, large tree shaded the shrine's entrance. It lifted its roots from the ground and opened its large mouth. *Ohh, it's you, Lesser Treant!*

The treant swung its branches, and a smattering of chartreuse baby spiders dropped down: the baby araneas. Yet more spiders crawled out from the shrine to greet us.

"Graar! Graar!" Partner stretched out her neck to get close to the baby spiders. They crawled all the way up to her and tapped her playfully on the face with their legs.

You're really gonna keep those things...? Don't come crying to me later.

I had to admit that being welcomed back really made this place feel like home. What with the baby spiders, and the treant, and Allo... Oh, and the clay rabbit. The more the merrier. Looking at the little gang I'd curated was pretty damning evidence that I'd taken the demon king path, though. These guys would make a fearsome army when they were all leveled up.

"Graar! Graar!" my partner suddenly screamed. I turned to see her face was covered in spiderwebs.

What in the world are you kids doing?

("Get it off! Get it off!")

Shake your head and do it yourself.

("I don't wanna shake too hard! They could fall and die!")

O-oh, right. They don't look that fragile, but then again, I didn't expect any spiders to spin their webs on a rank A wicked dragon's face.

I gently swiped my front leg across my partner's face to brush away the spiders.

"Graar..." Partner's head drooped down toward the ground, exhausted.

Enough about the baby spiders. Look over there. There was more food near the shrine, and I was sure the Lithovar villagers must've dropped it off. They would have seen the treant when they came... It made me think about how disappointed Valon would have been to see the shrine so empty.

I really appreciated it. My partner quickly recovered, drooling as she gazed toward the food. Honestly, I was pretty hungry myself, since I hadn't eaten in a while.

The tribe had left a pot full of alcohol, a wild boar carcass, and a large box. *Hm? Am I seeing things, or is the lid slightly off?* I wondered what was inside.

I walked toward the food, my mind occupied with what steps to take next. Our most pressing problem was the lingering strife between the two factions of the Lithovar Tribe. I needed to unite them in peace. *The anti-dragon faction disbanding doesn't mean that the sticklers over in the pro-dragon faction will accept them, though...* Old Tataruk had considered that to be the greatest barrier, but depending on how much influence I had as the dragon god, I might be able to smooth things over. It all came down to how big of a grudge the pro-dragon faction held.

("Alcohol! Alcohol! Alcohol!") Partner chanted.

Not having to worry about the food was a welcome change of pace. Even if I opened the lid and it exploded or whatever, I was strong enough to take it. I reached for the lid...and heard an ominous sound. I paused. The box trembled. Psychic Sense hadn't picked up a thing earlier, but now it went off like crazy. A cold shiver ran down my spine. *Oh boy.*

I had to do something about this. I couldn't destroy the whole box, though—this was a gift from the Lithovar Tribe. What if this was an animal they caught for me? I should decide what to do with it after I opened it. I hooked a claw underneath the lid.

("Maybe you should stop...") Partner said anxiously. Undeterred, I lifted the lid—and a huge bug sprang out, sending the lid flying. It had a striped body, eight long legs...and waaay too many fangs.

"Eegghh!"

I knew it. It was an avyssos. The idea of crushing it with my bare hands repulsed me, so I took a step backward.

“Eegghh!”

The avyssos hocked up something that looked a lot like a carcass. It was covered in sticky, yellow saliva, mixed with blood and flesh. The avyssos had been eating whatever meat was already inside of the crate.

I rushed to guard my body with my wings and felt a lukewarm sensation land against them.

“Eegghh! Eegghh!” The avyssos scrambled its legs and ran from me in a zigzag pattern.

“Raaaar!” I channeled magical energy to my closed wings and then burst them open to unleash Windcutter—and not just one round of it but eight. Blades of wind hurtled out toward the earth, the trees, the rocks. One of them cut the avyssos in two.

Normal Skill “Windcutter” Lv 5 has become Lv 6.

That cream-colored liquid oozed out from the avyssos’s body. It made for a grotesque sight, with its body cut in half, innards exposed.

Gained 180 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 180 Experience Points.

Phew, I’m shaping up to be a great avyssos exterminator. I’d really rather not see its dead body, though. The lid was off-kilter because of the avyssos hiding inside of the box. *Ugh, don’t do that.*

I slowly peeked inside the box and saw three birdlike monsters inside. Their stomachs were all partially bitten so that their guts were visible. *Why the heck did the avyssos bite chunks out of each one? This counts as harassment, surely. Don’t tell me it laid its nasty eggs inside these birds... These should be safe, right?*

According to the Divine Voice, the avyssos had a habit of laying its eggs in monsters that were larger than them. These birds were immune by that metric...but it was still gross that they were half-eaten. Saliva and bodily fluids

coated their bodies.

Even Partner stared at the remnants with a serious look on her face. If they were unappetizing to her, no one would eat them. I couldn't blame her.

("I can eat it if I close my eyes.")

S-seriously? Don't force yourself.

True to her word, my partner squeezed her eyes shut and gobbled down the leftover bird meat. Once she was done, she opened her eyes, panting.

("Want water... Water...")

You really didn't have to force that down, y'know... But since we shared the same body, I knew how hungry we were, so I understood.

("Might be my imagination, but my mouth feels all sticky...")

Ahh, I get that, yeah. Been there before. Seriously, though, you shouldn't have forced yourself.

I sighed and looked over toward the alcohol. *Clean out your mouth with the alcohol. Go ahead, drink all of it.*

Partner bit the edge of the pot and tipped her head up, downing the contents in one gulp. When she finished drinking, she set the empty pot back down on the ground.

("Ahh, I think it's better now.")

Yeah? Good, good...

I let out another sigh, a mixture of relief and exasperation. Then I saw the baby spiders crowding around the avyssos's body. They bit into it, tearing it to pieces and wrapping those chunks with their web. I stared in astonishment.

W-wait, are they gonna eat the avyssos? Is it even edible?

After Partner finished off the offerings, I decided to go rest in the shrine. Partner fell asleep right away, but no matter how I tried, sleep just wouldn't come.

Kkkshh, kkshh, kkshh!

The baby spiders were oddly amped up. They kept crawling around, which made such a racket that I couldn't get to sleep. *Can't you guys be quieter? Seriously!*

A baby spider was stuck to my nose. It was so itchy I thought I would sneeze.

Y-you little runt! What the hell are you doing?! I shook my head, and the spider dropped to the floor. Then I sat up.

"Ra-chaaar!"

Partner sneezed. *Did a spider wake you up too?* My tail also felt itchy, so I turned around—and saw an avyssos biting the tip of it.

You agaaaaaaaain?! The avyssos snuck up on monsters with terrifying ease, guaranteeing a painful surprise every time. The baby spiders must've been trying to warn us that another one had showed up.

I felt surprisingly calm. It was kinda sad that I'd become so used to these situations.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!" Partner roared, shaking her head back and forth. She, on the other hand, wasn't used to this at all.

"Ah...wa...em... Gale!" Allo reached out toward the avyssos latched to my tail. A mini tornado formed out of thin air and attacked the avyssos—except it seemingly failed to affect the monster's body. It clung to my tail, waiting for the tornado to disappear. When it did, the avyssos let go of my tail and made for Allo.

"Eegghh!" The avyssos opened its huge mouth, baring the creepy set of teeth within. From my closer vantage point, I realized it had two rows of teeth. I'd never wanted to look at it for long enough to notice before. Now I wanted to throw up.

I lifted my tail. The avyssos shot its yellowish saliva toward the back wall, which immediately began to crumble away. I guessed that was the avyssos's revenge for Gale.

Seriously, every skill this thing has is a ticket to Puketown. Someone put a stop to this already! I swung my tail and whapped the avyssos against the ceiling.

“Eegghh!”

The entire shrine shook. The avyssos’s body crumpled, that nasty cream-colored liquid oozing out. Next, I slammed its body against the floor. Then I squashed it flat. It twitched a few times. I ripped off one of its legs, leaving it with only seven. Finally, I dug my claw through its back.

Gained 173 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 173 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 65 has become Lv 66.

Ugh, I have avyssos guts between my claws! And they’re all over my tail too! I gotta go take a bath. Am I imagining it, or are there tons of avyssos around here lately? Not a fan...

Both the spiders and Allo participated in the fight, so I wondered if they leveled up a bit.

Name: Allo

Species: Levana Mage

Status: Cursed

Lv: 3/30

HP: 50/54

MP: 44/55

Hey, nice! I wasn’t expecting much of a change post-evolution, but she got a few levels in! To be fair, gaining the first few levels following a new evolution was quite easy, but I was still impressed. Allo’s next evolution might come up faster than I thought!

“Graar, graar!”

Wh-what is it, Partner?

(“O-on our tail!”)

I turned to see the avyssos leg still twitching away on our tail.

“Raaaaaaaaaar!” I swung my tail and sent the avyssos leg flying. The swarm of baby spiders gathered around its body swiftly pursued the leg in flight. *You guys are brimming with energy!*

I sighed and used Psychic Sense. Something else was coming toward the shrine—human, apparently. I glanced over at Allo, who nodded and ran off to the back of the shrine, holding her clay rabbit.

I poked my head out of the shrine to find Hibi and Valon. They usually traveled as a pair; was Valon her bodyguard or something? Anyway, they ran toward the shrine in a panic. He was faster than she was, and so he kept pausing so she could catch up. *Just run slower, then.*

Hibi wore her mask, so her facial expression was a mystery, but Valon was as pale as a ghost. When he saw me, his face relaxed with relief.

“We’re in trouble! The whole village is in trouble! Please, take pity on us and grant us your protection!” Valon reached me first and prostrated himself on the ground.

Wh-what in the world is going on? Hibi arrived moments later, panting behind her mask.

“Get back, Valon!”

“F-forgive me, Priestess. But, but...we need to hurry!” Valon bowed his head to Hibi and then scooted behind her.

After a cursory glance at Valon, who fidgeted anxiously behind her, Hibi closed her eyes to send me a message via Telepathy.

(“Our village is under attack. We’ve come to ask for your help.”)

A-attack?

(“The women and children have sought refuge in the basement of our meeting hall, but there are so many enemies that it’s only a matter of time...”)

O-okay. I need to hurry, right? Explain later. Want me to head straight there?

(“That would be best. Thank you, O Dragon God.”) Hibi bowed her head

deeply.

The two humans rode on my back on the way to the village. I saw another avyssos on the way there, but with no time to deal with it, I feigned ignorance. Who could possibly be attacking the village? Surely it wasn't the anti-dragon tribe, right? No, I did all I could to avoid a war between the two. It was hard to believe that defeating the Manticore would strain relations between the factions this quickly. Unless I overlooked something...?

The pro-dragon village came into view. I sent a message to Hibi. *Hey, I forgot to ask. Who's attacking you?*

("...Them.")

Them?

I'd find out when I got there, I reassured myself. Three Lithovar men stood at the gates armed with spears. Their backs were to each other to protect from a surprise attack. Someone carried a bloodied Lithovar man behind them. I couldn't see any enemies. The men looked around nervously but visibly relaxed at the sight of me.

"The dragon god's heeeeere!"

"You idiot, don't let your guard down!"

The moment the men yelled, a big black *something* appeared and charged toward the three of them. Its eight long legs roiled as it skittered in a beeline toward the trio. There was no doubt about it. It was an avyssos.

"It's here! It's here!"

"Calm down and attack it!"

The men broke their triangle formation to face the avyssos—but at that very instant *another* avyssos emerged. *T-two at the same time?!*

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!" I Bellowed to scare the avyssos. Startled, they fled to the back of the village to hide. I got them away from the guards, only to herd them inside the village.

Damn it! I knew there were a lot of avyssos around lately. They'd already made it to the village!

I let Hibi and Valon off my back, then looked at Hibi to send a message.

Why are there so many avyssos?

(“Their breeding season is drawing near, so they’re hunting to secure more nutrition for their pregnancy period. These past few years have seen their numbers soar during breeding season...along with their attacks. They must think attacking the village is a more efficient way of getting the nutrition they need all at once.”)

Ugh, gross! I didn’t need to know that. Although, actually, as the dragon god, I guess I did. How many avyssos are there?

(“They can conceal their presences. We don’t know how many there are in total, but I’m certain of at least twenty. We should assume far more than that.”)

O-oh. The avyssos was a rank C monster. I doubted many humans could take them on in a one-on-one fight. And more than twenty were here right now? How did the villagers ever survive without the dragon god around?

(“We must get rid of the avyssos now, or it will be much worse after they breed...”)

I imagined hundreds of avyssos babies charging toward me. *Ugh, cancel that mental image!* The avyssos could collectively do more damage than a single Manticore. This was gonna be a disaster if I didn’t act.

“Get away! Get off me, you filthy barbarians!”

A loud voice yelled from behind me.

“Ahh! Priestess, I’m so glad you’re here! We found an adventurer. We were going to chase him off but discovered he was gravely injured. We think the avyssos attacked him!”

Two Lithovar men were carrying a man covered in blood. He wore a blue shirt and red pants, possibly a military uniform. He flailed around wildly, flinging blood everywhere—whether out of fear or confusion, I couldn’t tell. His face was doused in blood, with so much in his eyes that I doubted he could see. A scabbard rested at his hip, sans sword. *Guess he lost his weapon somewhere.*

An adventurer, huh? It made sense that they traveled through here every

now and then. This guy picked the worst possible timing, though. If I were human, you'd never catch me anywhere that I might run into those giant cockroaches.

"Another monster...?" Hibi looked at the stranger. "Oh, I guess not. Carry him down to the basement of the meeting hall and give him treatment."

"Yes, Priestess! H-hey, stop struggling! This is an emergency! We'll be in trouble if we don't take shelter!"

"Shut it, you filthy ruffian! I know you plan to sacrifice me to that evil dragon! I know all about it!"

"Did you come alone? Is the rest of your party safe?"

"Shut up! I shan't tell you a thing!" he shrieked the whole time as they dragged him away.

Adoff told me how evil the Lithovar Tribe was before I came here, so it made sense for other people to hold the same opinion—reactions like that were only natural. The tribespeople were kind people in reality, though, so it made me a bit sad. I couldn't afford to dwell on it now. I had to focus on the main problem at hand.

I used Psychic Sense to search for the avyssos and headed toward the back of the village. Most of the tribe must have evacuated to the basement of the meeting hall before I arrived; I barely saw anyone around.

Knowing that the avyssos could conceal its presence, I changed my tactics and searched for humans instead. I isolated a signal and headed in its direction.

"It's dangerous inside the house! I'll show you to the meeting hall!"

"O-okay!"

Some Lithovar Tribe members were visiting all of the houses in turn and checking for children or old people that needed help to evacuate. I considered helping them out. I circled around to the back of the building to offer when they spotted me.

"Ah! It's the dragon god!" The child waved happily at me. I wasn't used to such friendly interactions, so I felt embarrassed. Right then, a cloud of dust flew

up behind the child—and an avyssos appeared.

“Eegghh!”

“Eegghh!”

“Eegghh!”

Scratch that. It wasn't just one avyssos. It was three.

How dare you hide underground like that! You scared the crap outta me!

“D-damn it! Get away!” A man hid the child behind his back and grabbed for his spear.

“Eegghh!” the avyssos screeched in unison. They gnashed their teeth as they lunged for him.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaaar!” I let out a Bellow to startle them. All three swiveled as one to look at me. Then they dashed back to where the man stood. They ran away last time, but this time they were prioritizing the hunt at all costs. They were outnumbered back then too. They must've realized they needed to turn the numbers in their favor.

I kicked off the ground, flapped my wings, and shot into the sky.

“G-go inside!” the man yelled. The child ran toward the house, sobbing, but then the walls burst open. A fourth avyssos appeared.

“Eegghh!”

“Waaaaaah!” the child screamed and fainted on the spot. I wanted to do the same. These things were relentless!

It was about time I scared the avyssos for a change. I soared higher and lifted my front legs. Then I plummeted to the ground, landing hard on my forelegs. This was the skill Earth Fall, which I'd gained along with the title skill Hero. The ground rumbled. Cracks appeared in the earth. Startled, the avyssos froze—and that was what I'd been waiting for. I flapped my wings and shot off four Windcutters. The monsters were fairly far away, but they were unmoving targets. I could still hit them.

“Eegggghh!”

Windcutter hit two of the avyssos and sent them hurtling through the air.

Gained 360 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 360 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 66 has become Lv 67.

The two remaining avyssos evaded the Windcutters, barely, but it proved a sufficient deterrent. They abandoned the humans and made to run away. I launched off the ground with my back feet and slammed my weight onto my front legs, crushing the avyssos beneath them. I heard a meaty *crunch* and felt the disgusting outline of the avyssos’s legs against the sole of my foot.

Awful as it was, I had to admit I was getting used to fighting these things. *Shame there’s about twenty more where those came from.*

“Th-thank you, Dragon God! Could you please stay here until I get the children to safety?” The man sat on the ground, panting, his face tilted up at me. We had no idea where the rest of the avyssos were hiding, so I was in no position to refuse. Heck, I doubted an adult could safely make it to the meeting hall.

I nodded and followed the man and his child through the village to the meeting hall. Remnants of the avyssos attack were evident everywhere: broken columns, collapsed sheds, and even coops that had been ravaged, only the birds’ legs and wings left behind.

Suddenly, a grotesque crunching noise split the air. An avyssos was feeding somewhere. The blood drained from my face. After glancing at the man, I broke into a run toward the sound. There! Three avyssos were eating something on the side of the road, and there was no way their prey was alive.

“*Raaaaaaaaar!*” I roared and flew up into the air. The avyssos’ guards were down as they ate, so they never saw me plummeting down on them until it was too late.

Gained 558 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 558 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 67 has become Lv 68.

Title Skill “Pest Killer” Lv 4 has become Lv 5.

The experience from killing three of those things was jacked up, all right. Too bad I didn't have time to celebrate. I suppressed the urge to look away and finally checked what the avyssos had been eating.

It was another avyssos. They were eating their own kind. Its body was torn apart, leaving it with a single leg. Oof, they were cannibals! Five arrows pierced through its body, which was decorated with wounds that looked like they came from spearheads. The Lithovars must have killed it.

I wiped my avyssos-spattered claws on the ground. Dammit, I didn't need to freak out so much because they were eating one of their own kind. Was that overkill? A normal Windcutter would have taken them out.

The man I was helping yelled out to me.

"That building over there is the meeting hall! Thank you! I can go the rest of the way by—"

Out of nowhere, two avyssos charged toward the meeting hall and cut him off.

"Eegggghh!"

They chewed a hole through the door and squirmed to get through it.

"...myself..." the man finished in a mutter. The anxious child clung to his legs.

Uhh, the people in the basement should be okay, right? I better head there fast, or the avyssos will eat up the entire village!

Part 2

I RAN TOWARD the meeting hall right as the avyssos stuck their heads through the hole they'd created. Luckily, the ceiling caved in and mercilessly rained rubble onto their heads, but I still saw over ten avyssos inside. They were crowded on top of a metal door in the floor—the door to the basement. They must've seen the people going in there.

The avyssos crawled over and sank their teeth into the ground. The floor crumbled, and a hole opened. They seemed likely to surge the basement. I couldn't waste a single moment. I stuck not only my head but my forelegs into the meeting hall. Partner joined me. The entire building shook.

"Graaaaaaaar!" Partner gave a shriek at the sight of the cluster of avyssos. I wanted to scream myself, but there was no time. Three of the monsters were charging straight at my face.

"Eeeeeegggghh!" They opened their big mouths. Sticky, murky saliva dripped down their chins, releasing a very distinctive stench.

"Raaaaaaaar!" I can't do it! I can't do it! Those things are too disgusting!

The other avyssos changed targets as well. Their wide mouths unhinged as they sped at me. Five, six, seven... I lost count!

"Raar!"

I lifted my forelegs and forced the rest of my body into the meeting hall, skewering an avyssos with each set of my front claws. Rather than focus on killing them outright, I'd incapacitate them enough that they'd be out of the way.

The avyssos in front split into three lines and lunged for my face. I tore into one with my fangs. Something lukewarm spread throughout my mouth. *Oh no.* Its legs were still moving. Nausea rose up from the bottom of my throat.

"Raagh, raa-hegg! Raaagh!" I coughed violently, spewing fragments of the avyssos everywhere. *Ugh, I'm gonna throw up...* I glanced over to where Partner

was slamming her whole head against an avyssos. *Wow, wish I'd thought of that.*

Wait, huh? The avyssos split into three lines. Where's the other one?

"Graaar!" Partner whacked her head against mine. It was a hard hit, and I hadn't expected it. My vision blacked out for a second.

"Raaar!" Hey, I thought my jaw was gonna bust off! I turned and whacked my head against the ceiling. There was an unexpected sharp sound, and then an avyssos—which was on top of my head, apparently—fell to the ground. Ew. It climbed on top of me at some point. Partner must've whacked me in the head to try to knock it off.

I shifted all my weight onto my forelegs and stomped on its fallen body. Of course, I didn't *want* to, but no way was I gonna leave it half-dead.

"Eegh!" The floor buckled as I crushed the avyssos, which let out only a single brief scream.

Gained 144 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 144 Experience Points.

The avyssos's bodily fluids dripped down my arm. It stung a little. I remembered that this gunk contained a paralyzing venom but discarded the thought immediately. *Really don't wanna think too hard about its fluids right now.*

"Eeeggggh, eeeghhh, eeeghhh!" Three other avyssos charged. I wrenched my body backward, and that was it for the meeting hall. It was collapsing for real. Its walls and columns fell, sending up a huge cloud of dust.

"Eeeegghhhh!" The avyssos made a frantic dash to get out of the hole I left behind. I watched a huge piece of rubble fall onto one of their backs. Before long, the entire place had fallen in on itself, and I couldn't see a thing.

Gained 684 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 684 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 68 has become Lv 69.

All right, as far as I could tell the floor had held. That was good. Maybe I should've just crushed the place back when I first saw the avyssos grouped together in there. It would have saved me a bunch of stress. Judging by how much experience I got, I must've killed four of them or so. Sadly, there were way more where those guys came from.

I braced myself as several more crawled out from the rubble. Injured as they were from the cave-in, though, they were easy pickings.

"Eeeggggh, eeeghhh, eeeghhh!"

Windcutter made short work of them. Now there was a pile of seven avyssos bodies on the ground. After I'd killed the third one, I reached level 70. I fired another Windcutter toward the last avyssos.

Gained 186 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 186 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 70 has become Lv 71.

These things aren't half-bad for leveling. Almost makes up for how much I loathe them and wish I never had to see one again. Almost.

Title Skill "Pest Killer" Lv 5 has become Lv 6.

Title Skill "Hero" Lv 4 has become Lv 6.

My Hero skill leveled up. Did that mean I finished off the majority of the avyssos? No need to let down my guard yet, though. I decided that for now I should clear off the rubble so that people could get out of the basement room. I used my foreleg to push aside the rubble, uncovering the door leading to the basement. The floor was thankfully intact.

Good, good. That's a relief. Now, if only we could say farewell to the avyssos forever.

The door to the basement opened, and Hibi poked her head out. I saw stairs leading further down behind her. She closed her eyes.

("Dragon God, the avyssos...")

I killed about twenty of them. I think that was it, but I can't be sure, since

they're really good at concealing themselves and all.

Behind Hibi, the adventurer from earlier bobbed up into view, supported by two Lithovar men. He had a thin cloth wrapped around his hands and feet in place of bandages.

“Derek, it seems that the avyssos are gone for now.”

The man in the military uniform gave a relieved sigh and sat down on the stairs. He—I guessed his name was Derek?—was in a frenzy back when they first brought him in here, wailing about how the Lithovar Tribe was a bunch of barbarians, but he seemed calmer now. His past behavior made me think maybe he would refuse to talk to them, but I guessed he told them his name at least.

Derek glared at me and then stood up. He pushed away the men trying to help him and strode toward the forest.

“Hey, are you leaving? You’re still injured! You’ll end up as avyssos food!”

Derek ignored them and kept trying to walk, but he soon staggered and then tripped. Hibi pulled up her mask to expose her face and ran to him. “Where do you think you’re going after a mere day of rest? You lost your weapon. You won’t make it out of the forest alive in such a state.”

He didn’t reply.

“Are you searching for your party? We can help you find them. Though we can’t go too far with the avyssos crawling around everywhere.”

“They’re fine,” Derek blurted at last, as if remembering something.

“I see. I’m glad.”

“They left me for dead and ran away. They didn’t even try to fight. They were all rookies, they...didn’t even care...” His voice trembled. He hung his head and curled into a ball.

Wh-whoa, this is heavier than I thought.

His shoulders trembled. He was crying. Hibi gently rubbed his back to comfort him. I decided to leave him to the Lithovar Tribe to handle. I needed to go out on patrol.

I scanned the whole village with Psychic Sense, but nothing came up. The place was like a ghost town now that the tribe members had all evacuated. I picked up on a fairly large group of people, so I followed it and wound up before another large building, like the meeting hall. Chances were high that it also had a basement for evacuation purposes. The villagers here were used to avyssos attacks.

Something pinged that felt similar to an avyssos, so I switched paths to pursue it. Soon enough, I encountered a stack of them skewered onto a spear like a messed-up modern art sculpture. They were dried out; it was a safe assumption that they weren't killed today. I wondered if this was an attempt to ward off other avyssos by example. I saw the logic: If animals saw a stack of their own kind like this, dead on a skewer, they'd sense danger and run away. Too bad. Knowing the avyssos, they were more likely to be attracted to the scent as food instead.

I circled the village for a while, but I didn't see any other avyssos. I did find an old lady cowering behind a wooden crate and a child hiding inside of a building, though. Since I'd already made one round around the village, I decided to take them back to the meeting hall with me.

"*Raaaar!*" I roared, and the metal door opened. Hibi climbed up the stairs to greet us.

Sifting through the mountain of debris was tough, especially with the avyssos bodies buried inside. As the one who destroyed the building, however, I felt I should be the one to clean it up. *I should help with the rebuilding too. I bet I could build a house way faster than a human.*

Several more people climbed up the stairs and freaked out a bit when they saw me. I wanted to wave back, but Hibi held up a hand to command our attention.

She closed her eyes and sent a message.

("What did you see?")

I found two people. They're on my back. I didn't find any avyssos. I don't know all of their habits, so I don't know if I really killed every last one of them or if they're just hiding.

("I don't think they're hiding.")

Why not? When I got back to the shrine, they were hiding inside one of the offerings.

("If there were avyssos in the village, they would already be eating the bodies of the dead.")

Oh. Right... Yeah.

("We've been hiding underground, so any avyssos left up there would come to eat their own kind. They reveal themselves when they feed. If you didn't see any, then they're not in the village.")

Guess that makes sense.

("I knew you would save us, O Dragon God. I can't believe you defeated so many avyssos so quickly...!")

Thanks for the compliments and stuff, but I don't think I'm up to a celebration today. I'm exhausted. I'm gonna go back to the shrine and have a nice, long bath in the river to wash all the avyssos guts off of me.

("You're leaving already, Dragon God?")

Yeah. Sorry. I'm going home for the day.

("But what about the avyssos bodies? Shall we deliver them to you later?")

Nooo! I don't want 'em! Please, no!

I shook my head vehemently. Partner hadn't been paying attention until now, but she shook her head too—and as a result, we bonked our heads together, hard. Hibi gave me a worried look, but it'd take a lot more than a cracked skull to take me out. What mattered now was our new problem: getting rid of the bodies.

Hibi looked puzzled. Well, I was as well. *Please. I'm done with avyssos. For good.*

("...All right. I'll tell the other members.")

Thank goodness she listened. If they brought me a stack of avyssos bodies as my next tribute, I might start crying and run out of the village forever.

I wonder how many avyssos there are? I killed twenty today. Maybe I drove them to extinction?

("It would be difficult to completely exterminate them unless you attacked their nest. That would be the only way to solve the overpopulation problem too.")

An avyssos nest? Sounds like hell. You mean there's even more of them? But if I don't stop them from overpopulating, they'll just keep attacking you.

("I don't think you should consider entering their nest. I formed a unit of Lithovar soldiers to find the nest...but no one's ever entered one.")

They never found it?

("No. They never returned. Everyone who has followed an avyssos has suffered the same fate.")

Huh? So, the avyssos killed them all?

("A hundred years ago, there was a hero named Gagaz. With the help of the dragon god, he almost exterminated the entire avyssos population and successfully staved off their attacks.")

That guy does sound like a hero! The Lithovar Tribe has a higher combat ability than a given human, but it makes sense that sometimes one guy stands above the rest.

("I am afraid that our ancestors got too confident. They basically forced Gagaz to search for the avyssos nest. They took a troop of all the strongest warriors in the village and went out searching for the nest together.")

I'm not liking where this is going.

("They decided they would skewer the avyssos alive with their spears, pluck their legs off, and then follow them. They thought for certain this would lead them to the nest. They set off on their journey with the blessing of the village, leaving behind the women, children, and the elderly.")

.....

("Several days passed, then weeks. The avyssos' breeding period ended. But no one returned. The dragon god also disappeared for some time after that...")

Huh? O-oh, right... I guess now that you mention it, I think I might remember something like that...

("If they were that dangerous back then, think of what might be waiting for you in their nest now, at the source of the overpopulation. That is why you shouldn't go searching for it.")

That was all Hibi said before she began to tremble. It seemed like they'd told this story for a very long time. She probably didn't even like talking about it.

("Hey. There's no way we should do it,") Partner interjected.

Yeah, I'm not really crazy about the idea either.

I turned to go back to the shrine after all, but then I saw that adventurer Derek climb up the stairs. Several other Lithovars followed him with worried looks on their faces.

"What are you doing up here? You're still not healed," Hibi said.

Derek paused and then nodded. "I can't stay here forever. I need to let my party know I'm still alive. If I'm away for too long..."

I wondered what the rest of his sentence would be, but he didn't finish it. He probably thought his party would go home without him. If they thought he was dead, they wouldn't waste their time coming to look for him.

"Hey. Are you sure you'll be fine alone?" one of the men asked. He held up a spear as though proclaiming, "I can come along and be your bodyguard!"

"I'll be fine. It'll be too confusing if my party sees you."

"And how do you think you're going to get through the forest without any weapons?" The man handed Derek his own spear. Derek hesitated for a moment but then reluctantly accepted it. "This is my favorite spear. The avyssos attack from behind, so be careful. Graffants are slow and mors will leave you alone as long as you don't provoke them. If you go in a straight line from here, the monster you'll have to be on the lookout for the most is the avyssos."

"....." Derek didn't thank him for the spear, but he did bow his head slightly. He was about to walk away but then turned back toward the tribe. His eyes darted from the man who'd given him the spear to Hibi. Once he made eye

contact with Hibi, he blushed slightly and then turned back around. Hibi looked confused.

I wondered if he'd fallen in love with her because she'd been kind to him when he was injured. Hibi was a beautiful woman, and he had likely talked to her most of all. It might be possible. Even though he'd treated them like enemies at first, he must've opened up a lot in the end.

"Um... I'd like to come back and thank you. Once things have calmed down. Is that all right?"

Hibi was silent for a moment and then slowly shook her head. "Outsiders should stay away from our village. If you hadn't been injured, we would have tried to scare you away. If I said I didn't know what you were talking about when you asked if we would sacrifice you to the dragon god, I'd be lying. You should forget you ever came here." Hearing Hibi say this, the rest of the tribe lowered their heads. She just admitted they sacrificed humans to the Manticore. I guess if they were offering up their own kin, they'd have absolutely zero reservations about offering up travelers. I wondered if this faction of the tribe had done it before too. It wasn't like they could pivot from kidnapping people to suddenly being nice to them for no reason.

That was why they chased away any travelers unless they were injured. That was how they got entangled with the Manticore in the first place, when she appeared disguised as a human. But now that the danger was over, they were sure to continue assisting any injured intruders, just like Derek.

"...Oh," Derek said after a brief pause and then hung his head. "I'm grateful to you for saving my life. You're telling me to forget what happened today...but I don't think I ever can."

He took a few steps and then turned back. "After this... Ah, it's nothing." He had a conflicted look on his face, like he was trying to decide whether or not he was going to say something. He decided to keep whatever it was to himself, although when he turned away from the tribe for a final time, he muttered faintly, "Don't worry. I won't let anything happen."

Is he expecting to run into some weird monster or something?

I considered going with him part way to protect him, but when I tried to

follow him, he went pale as a ghost and started sprinting. Well, it was nice to see that he was feeling better, I guess.

“Raar.”

He would be in trouble if an avyssos attacked him with those stats, though. I was worried about him, but he said he didn’t need any help, so if I tried again I’d be crossing a boundary. I didn’t want to cause some misunderstanding and risk getting attacked by his friends either.

Before I returned to the shrine, I used Psychic Sense to keep an eye on Derek. I was prepared to come to his rescue if anything jumped out at him, but nothing happened.

Except... I did find a sword on the way back. Derek went this way, so he must’ve noticed it, but he hadn’t picked it up. I didn’t know if it was because he decided the long spear he’d received would be better for fighting monsters, or he just preferred spears, or he pretended not to see the sword on the ground.

The first time I saw Derek, he had been yelling up a storm about the Lithovar being filthy barbarians, though who knew why. Only he did. Once he arrived safely at the edge of the forest, I stopped tracking him and got back on course to go home myself. But I realized that I’d gotten pretty off track—this wasn’t the way back home at all. It was a huge detour. I guess it didn’t hurt to explore other parts of the forest, so long as I was already here...

Part 3

WHEN I ARRIVED back at the shrine, I saw the lesser treant preparing for battle, along with Allo, who was supposed to be hiding until I got home.

“Eeeghhhhh!”

And wouldn’t you know, they were squaring off with an avyssos—that eight-legged abomination that skeeved me out so bad I could barely look at it. The pattern on its body alone gave me traumatic flashbacks. This was now the third time it had come to my shrine. They were seriously breeding like crazy. *This is way worse than I’d thought!*

Back to the problem at hand, not only were Allo and the lesser treant rank D monsters, but their levels weren’t that high to begin with. There was no way they could beat a rank C monster like an avyssos. The disparity in their stats was too great.

I ran toward the shrine to stop the fight. Four clay rabbits surrounded Allo. She must’ve made them with her Clay Doll skill. They were positioned in such a way that they’d be able to counter attacks no matter which direction the avyssos chose.

Allo reached a hand out toward the avyssos. “...rth...ic... Clay!” The ground beneath the avyssos’s feet glowed, and clay spikes shot out toward it. Pivoting, the avyssos started running at full speed.

“Eeeghh!” It ran around Allo—and it was fast. The avyssos was far more agile than she was; its speed was its highest stat. She stood zero chance against it.

“Raaaaaaaaaar!” I roared as I ran toward them, but the avyssos didn’t react to me. Allo kept her eye on it too, looking flustered.

Abruptly, the clay rabbits tossed themselves into the air, one after the other, leaving behind only shells. They didn’t make a single sound. They gave their lives without thought, returning to nothing more than lumps of clay.

“Ke-treeeeeeeee!” The lesser treant swung its huge branch arms. It had no

chance of keeping up with the avyssos. All it could do with its wild attack was distract it, so, of course, it didn't land a single hit. It was a goner. Its branch broke off and flew into the air. The avyssos slammed into the treant's trunk, knocking it backward.

The avyssos pulled away with a mouth full of splintered wood. I guessed it bit into the treant in the process. It gnashed its disgusting multitude of teeth, and I saw fragments of the ruined clay rabbits mixed in with the splinters of wood.

"Eegh! Eegh! Eeeeghh! Eeghh!"

Unexpectedly and very abruptly, the avyssos stopped moving. It gagged instead. It threw up the remnants of the clay rabbits.

"Raaaar!" This was my chance! I flapped my wings and shot off two Windcutters simultaneously. The wind blades intersected across the avyssos's body, cutting it into two halves right on the spot.

Gained 105 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 105 Experience Points.

I was relieved I had arrived in time to help. One more minute and Allo, the lesser treant, and the baby spiders would've been a three-course dinner for the avyssos.

Well, maybe not. The avyssos had spat out the clay rabbits for some reason. It probably attacked it thinking it was a regular rabbit, but it ended up not tasting too good. Allo had used magic to bring her dolls to life from the earth, but their bodies were nothing but clay.

"...ab...it..." Allo crumpled weakly to the ground, gathering up the broken bodies of her clay rabbits.

Now I knew I couldn't leave them at the shrine alone anymore. Who knew when an avyssos would come back? I had no idea mating season for the avyssos would be so scary. I needed to focus on leveling the crew right away, for their own safety. So far, Allo had been a rank F wight and a rank E low skull mage, and now she was a rank D levana mage.

If she became a rank C monster, she might finally be able to fight on equal

ground with the avyssos. With the help of an evolved lesser treant, she could definitely defeat one.

I wasn't sure when or if the baby spiders would start to show symptoms of the Dragon Scale Powder curse. If their status changed to Cursed, I'd have to release them back into the wild immediately. Then I'd have to level them up to ensure they could hunt for themselves until then. It was my responsibility for taking them in, after all.

They had no problem eating the avyssos, so maybe I could teach them to track their scents and become avyssos hunters or something...

Well, regardless, I guessed I was going avyssos hunting. They'd keep popping up if I walked around anyway, so I didn't have much choice. *Wish I could look at some different monsters for a change...*

Part 4

I TOOK ALLO, the treant, and the baby spiders with me back into the forest so that I could level them up. I traveled in the opposite direction from the village. The last thing I wanted was for the Lithovars to see this crew.

The baby spiders crawled haphazardly all over the place, but they more or less followed behind me. I wished they wouldn't wander too much or else they'd wind up as avyssos chow. But it wasn't like they could understand me, so there was nothing I could do about it.

As I carefully made my way through the forest, I used Psychic Sense to make sure I didn't run into the Lithovar Tribe. Something pinged nearby, and I looked up to see those green glowing forest sprites, the laran, sitting on a tree branch again. This time there were more than usual—eight of them. I thought maybe they didn't weigh anything since they were so little, but the branch creaked a bit under their combined weight. They weren't doing anything in particular. They just stared at me, observing from a distance.

Then, without warning, they all jumped off from the branch and scattered in different directions, where they vanished into thin air. Those things were such an enigma.

(*"This way, this way!"*) As I looked around to find the laran, Partner swung her neck around. She'd spotted something.

I used Psychic Sense to check the area she indicated. Something big was out there. I brought my face down to the ground and heard the faint sound of footsteps. *Some kind of giant monster?* I couldn't say what it was for sure until I checked its stats, but its movements were slow. It could be the perfect thing to gain my crew some experience points, especially with me around to provide backup in a pinch.

With the giant monster heading this way, I decided to get to higher ground so we could have the advantage. I could tell it was a giant type, but I had a hunch it'd be smaller than me. Probably about the size of a Little Rock Dragon.

In the distance, a tree suddenly crashed down. There it was. Some kind of huge cow about six meters long and covered in brown fur. The fur by its face was abnormally long. Its eyes were bright red, and it panted as though excited. I could tell by its stance that it was ferocious about something. *I-I don't think Allo can defeat this thing after all...* It was way too big.

Species: Graffant

Status: Fury

Lv: 27/55

HP: 342/361

MP: 125/153

Attack: 152

Defense: 167

Magic: 98

Agility: 64

Rank: C

Special Skills:

Short Fuse: Lv —

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 2

Poison Resistance: Lv 3

Falling Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

Horn Lance: Lv 4

Charge: Lv 3

Headbutt: Lv 3

Power: Lv 3

Title Skills:

Might of the Forest: Lv 4

Reckless Rampager: Lv 3

In comparison, Allo's magic and agility were considerably lower. From past experience, I knew that you needed at least half of the enemy's defense stats to deal any kind of damage head-on. If Allo wounded the graffant and then kept hammering away at that same spot, she would, but she could also die from just one good hit from it. This was gonna be pretty dangerous.

Still, I couldn't deny that this was a prime chance. With my agility, I could grab Allo and the others and get them out of the way if the graffant tried to counterattack. It didn't seem to have any weird skills, at least none that I hadn't seen before, and all focused on forward-moving attacks. As long as I could get in front of Allo and the others, I'd be able to prevent the graffant's attacks.

It was such a high level that my crew would gain a ton of experience. I wasn't about to let this chance go—it was a perfect opportunity to boost Allo and the others up to a point where they could protect themselves. We had to fight it.

I shot off a little Windcutter toward the graffant's thick legs. The magic blades only slightly injured its skin; I could have severed its legs if I wanted to, but the idea here was to provoke it.

"Mwwwooooooooo!" The attack only made the graffant angrier. It opened its mouth wide and let out a bellow, then charged straight at me. I kicked off the ground and flapped up into the air so I could be directly above the graffant. I shot off four more Windcutters with another mighty beat of my wings.

I aimed for its back legs and its rear end. Without its back legs, there was less risk that it would stomp Allo and the rest to death if they attacked from its blind spot. If I injured its rear end, that would give everyone a good starting target. The first two Windcutters lopped lumps of flesh from the monster's giant back legs. Meaty chunks flew through the air, splattering fresh blood everywhere. The graffant lost its balance and leaned forward on its front legs.

Before it could let out another scream, the other two Windcutters cut through its rear. This made it even angrier. Its glare was baleful as I hovered in the air.

“*Mwwwoooooo!*” the graffant raged. My work done, I waited a moment and then landed on my back legs.

This should be good. I’d wanted to take off all four of the monster’s legs, but such drastic interference was likely to lower how much experience Allo and the others received. I’d learned my lesson with Ballrabbit’s fight with the red ants. Unless they directly played a role in the battle, the combatant wouldn’t gain experience. I had to weaken the graffant as little as possible.

Still, I’d damaged its mobility and weakened its blind spot. I’d gotten its attention, and if anything went wrong, then I could jump in. I’d done all I could to cultivate a safe battle against a rank C monster for Allo and the others, who were rank D and E.

“*Mwoooo! Mwoooo!*” The graffant dragged its back legs as it chased after me. It was certainly less powerful now, and much slower. Allo, the lesser treant, and the baby spiders all got into position behind it.

“Eard...ma...gic... Clay!” Allo intoned clumsily. The earth bulged into several sharp spikes. They rose as needles to stab into the graffant’s exposed flesh. This irritated it, causing it to drag its lower body as it tried to turn. It faced Allo, who was in front, and dropped its jaw. It aimed its ferocious looking horn right at her.

I thought maybe I should help, but then I watched the earth shift under her. I held back.

“*Mwoo!*” the graffant howled. Allo suddenly jumped backward. The earth beneath her feet turned to clay, and she used the impact to propel herself. She must’ve prepared for that the second the graffant turned toward her. Allo’s magic was way more effective than her agility. It was faster for her to move using magic than to try to physically dodge attacks.

She climbed up on the lesser treant’s branches. The baby spiders scattered in all four directions. *Guess they’re scared of the graffant.*

The beast's horn ended up plunging deep into the ground, missing Allo. It dug its forelegs in the ground, muscles bulging. Allo reached out for its horn. She used Clay to change the earth again; it rose to swallow the graffant's horn completely, where it hardened solid.

"Mwwoo?!" The shift pulled the graffant's mouth toward the ground. *Is Allo trying to suffocate it?* When the graffant lifted its forelegs high in the air, the lesser treant sensed the danger and backed away, still carrying Allo. She stopped controlling the earth only to aim her hand at the graffant's face.

"...nd magic... Gale!" A gust of wind appeared and shot straight toward the graffant's eyeballs. *Slash!* Bright red blood gushed from its eyes. The beast wasn't blinded, though, as it directed its glare at Allo.

It stomped on the ground with its legs. The earth rumbled. It shot itself high into the air, using what must have been its High Jump skill. I thought I'd crushed its back legs, so I was surprised it could still jump that high.

The lesser treant used its roots to skitter away, staring up with its hollowed-out eyes at the graffant still in midair.

"Ea...gic... Clay!" Allo intoned—but the life seemed to drain from her body instead. Her skin had dried up. She looked like she was returning to the earth itself. She'd poured more than half of her remaining MP into her Clay skills. It was thanks to this sacrifice that a huge clay needle shot up from the earth and through the brush. It climbed about two meters, aiming straight for the plummeting graffant's stomach. Allo planned on using the downward force from its own High Jump to cause damage.

I thought it would work, but then the graffant tilted its body to the side and out of the path of Allo's attack. Her expression clouded over. I stepped in to help, shooting off two Windcutters toward the graffant's face and chest. The first one slashed its face, making its body shift. The second one dug into its stomach.

"Mwoooooo!" The huge earth needle plunged into the open wound on the graffant's chest. The needle couldn't withstand the force of the blow and disintegrated on impact. The graffant landed. The earth shook.

"Mwo..." It landed on its stomach but used its forelegs to sit up. The tip of the

clay needle and several shards protruded from its abdomen, where they leaked rivulets of blood. How was it standing after taking so much damage?! It didn't seem to be slowing down either. There was lots of life in the old bull yet, and considering how ridiculous its stamina and defense were, I shouldn't have been too surprised.

Allo plummeted backward, losing her grip on the lesser treant's branches, but it scooped her up at once and distanced them both from the graffant. Allo didn't have much MP left. That last Clay used up too much. It was about time for me to wrap things up... Hm?

It was then that I noticed the baby spiders making a beeline for the wound on the graffant's rear end.

"Mwoooo! Mwoooo!" The baby spiders spat out silk, sticking their webs across the wound. The graffant fought back, swinging its body around, but its legs were unsteady from the hard fall, and it was too weak to do much. Its attempts at counterattacking failed; it couldn't reach the wound on its butt.

I took advantage of the distraction to use Windcutter to crush its forelegs. It fell onto its stomach with a plop. The baby spiders swarmed its wound and bit. And bit. And bit.

"Mwoooooooo! Mwoooooooo!" The baby spiders ravaged the gaping wound. The cut I made was shallow, but blood kept on pouring out. The graffant tried to lift what was left of its legs to shake its body, to resist, but it gradually grew weaker. Then it spasmed. Blood flowed out of all the gashes on its body as its HP drained. Its eyes rolled back in its head. All the energy left its body.

Gained 173 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 173 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 71 has become Lv 72.

The notification about experience points meant the graffant was definitely dead. Allo and the others would hopefully receive enough experience from all of that fighting that they could protect themselves from now on. Thanks to my ridiculous amount of MP, I could practically heal Allo as many times as I needed to, but that wouldn't matter if a single hit could kill her.

Let's check how much they leveled. I'd start with Allo, then the treant, and then the baby spiders.

Name: Allo

Species: Levana Mage

Status: Cursed

Lv: 14/30

HP: 60/78

MP: 4/87

Species: Lesser Treant

Status: Cursed

Lv: 9/25

HP: 38/75

MP: 9/29

Species: Araneae

Status: Normal

Lv: 5/12

HP: 8/12

MP: 5/9

Whoa, Allo went from level 6 all the way up to level 14! She was closing in on a turning point. Once she got over this hump, she would be well on her way to becoming a rank C monster.

Blame it on the lack of MP, perhaps, but she seemed very weak. She could barely stand. Her expression was pained, and the quality of her skin had

worsened. Her skin had always reminded me of clay, but now it looked like straight-up dirt. I wondered if her MP was necessary to maintaining the integrity of her body, seeing how she was in an even sorrier state without it than I had been.

The treant had leveled from 4 up to 9. Not so impressive, but I'd been spoiled with my experience-boosting skill, so what did I know? Still better than nothing. The treant's main job was helping Allo to move during the battle, and it did little to no direct damage, so I guess that made sense.

The baby araneae went from level 1 to level 5. Well, I only checked one of their statuses, but I imagined it was the same for the others. Not bad for chewing on the graffant for a while. They were on their way to their first evolution, and, since they were rank E monsters, they'd get there quickly.

I wanted to keep leveling everyone up, but Allo specialized in magic attacks. With her MP this low, she could barely act. Even if we found some way to bump up her MP, she'd be in a precarious position since she was already weakened. Man, if her MP weren't an issue, she could attack forever and level up like crazy. But, of course, nothing was ever that easy.

Guess I'll have to try again tomor—huh?

Name: Allo

Species: Levana Mage

Status: Cursed

Level: 14/30

HP: 60/78

MP: 4/87

Attack: 43

Defense: 37

Magic: 79

Agility: 32

Rank: D

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 2

Undead: Lv —

Dark Type: Lv —

Body Morph: Lv 4

Resistance Skills:

Debuff Resistance: Lv —

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Gale: Lv 5

Poor Curse: Lv 3

Life Drain: Lv 2

Clay: Lv 5

Regenerate: Lv 2

Clay Doll: Lv 4

Mana Drain: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Evil Dragon's Servant: Lv —

Hollow Mage: Lv 3

Allo gained a Normal Skill! She must've learned it when she leveled up. I vaguely remembered seeing Mana Drain somewhere before. I couldn't be sure because View Status didn't work great on it, but I thought I remembered that the Forte Slime had Life Drain and Mana Drain skills. Its skills were similar to Allo's, so maybe the skills came as a set. Allo already had Life Drain, so it made

sense that she learned Mana Drain too.

I guessed from the name that it absorbed MP from enemies and transferred it to your own. That meant that we could solve the problem at hand by making her drain my MP—I had a full tank of 1926/1926 MP. I did some simple math and figured she'd be able to take twenty-two full charges from me. On top of that, since I had Automatic MP Recovery, my MP would recharge in no time.

If Allo consistently used Mana Drain on me, she could use the full force of her earth magic, Clay, and her wind magic, Gale, to her heart's content. Her magic was her highest stat, and, now that she was level 14, she could deal some real damage to a rank C monster.

And I knew the perfect monster to test her out on. One that was a higher rank than Allo, low on defense, and absolutely crawling all around here: the avyssos. Allo could potentially hunt an avyssos without my help, and if she could, she'd reach her maximum level in no time.

I decided to test out her Mana Drain skill. I brought my tail over to Allo, who was sitting exhausted in one of the treant's branches. She looked up at me. I nodded and shook my tail.

"Th...ank...ou..." she said haltingly. She touched my tail, then hugged her whole body to it. She was so dried out that pieces of her skin fell off, dissolving. The part of her touching my tail glowed. I felt my mana transferring into her body.

"Ah, ah..." Her crumbly skin slowly began to regain its moisture. It looked better than usual. Her hair had been especially dry, but now it seemed to have a bit more shine to it...maybe. As slight a change as it was, it was nonetheless an improvement.



Allo seemed far perkier overall, but she'd gained a faint, dark glow. I assumed it was because she absorbed my MP. *Let's see how much she got back.*

Name: Allo

Species: Levana Mage

Status: Cursed, Magic Modifier (Major)

Lv: 14/30

HP: 78/78

MP: 87/87

Hey, she's fully recovered! I wasn't sure how effective her magic attacks would be against the avyssos, but at least she was in fighting condition. Also, she appeared to have added some weird status condition from absorbing my MP. *Magic Modifier, huh? Guess we were lucky. Not only do we have that to raise her MP, but she can use as much magic as she wants with Mana Drain. She's definitely gonna pierce through the avyssos' defenses with that.*

Even though she was done absorbing my MP, Allo clung to my tail.

...Hey... It's done.

"So...relaxing..."

Y-yeah.

Once Allo composed herself, we left the graffant to search for an avyssos.

"Graar..." Partner stared longingly at the corpse, but I told her we could get it on the way back.

I'll roast the whole thing up. Don't worry.

I tapped my tail on the ground to get the baby spiders away from the graffant. It took about three whacks to get them to give up and start following me again.

Now that we were all ready, I walked through the forest in search of an avyssos. I never thought I'd willingly attempt hunting one of these things.

But if Allo could damage one with her magic, then rank C monsters like avyssos made perfect grinding fodder. If she could beat one alone, we could have her evolved by sundown. The only thing was, now that I wanted to run into an avyssos, I couldn't find one anywhere. *What gives?! They wouldn't leave me alone when I was trying to avoid them!*

They were able to conceal themselves, though. Good to keep in mind.

"Graar, graar..." The more we walked, the more pitiful Partner sounded. (*"Hey. Aren't you hungry? Hey!"*)

Are you really that hung up on that thing? Can't you wait until we test out Allo's Mana Drain skill?

("Wouldn't it be better to eat first? Huh?")

...Fine. I haven't found an avyssos yet, so I guess we can eat first. I'm raring to eat my first roasted meat in a while, no lie.

The graffant looked like a giant cow, which added to my anticipation. *Man, wish we had some salt!* We returned to the graffant in a procession: Allo sat on the treant's branches, the baby spiders scattered all around, but all of them followed me obediently.

("Meat! Meat! Meat!")

Hard to believe sometimes what a pretty girl you transform into as a human. Feels wrong to hear you chanting about food. Also, you might consider talking a bit more feminine...

("Meat! Meat! Mea...t?")

Once we got closer to the graffant, my partner trailed off, confused. It was clear why.

"Eeeghh! Eeeghh! Eeeghhhh!"

A group of avyssos huddled over the graffant's body. They bit into it, breaking apart the meat. Aha... I forgot they liked to lay their eggs inside of monsters that were larger than them.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!" Partner roared with fury, shaking her head. I saw tears streaming from her eyes. (*"That's why I said to eat first!"*)

S-sorry! I underestimated the avyssos. But hey, we successfully lured them in, right? All's well that ends well! It'll still be edible once we roast it up!

I took my gaze off Partner and looked to Allo. Sensing what was on my mind, she nodded. I didn't have to say a word to her or the lesser treant to express what I wanted, probably because of the Evil Dragon's Servant skill. Thank goodness. I couldn't transform into a human every time I needed to tell them something.

Allo was perched on the treant's branches, so I moved my tail up to get her. She jumped onto it, and I curled my tail toward my face.

All right. No worries about running out of MP, okay? You can use all your spells at full force.

Allo lifted her right hand up toward the sky. The black light that surrounded her contracted to fit in the palm of her hand.

"Wu-ind...gic... Gale!" The ball of magic shot out. It stirred up the wind to form a miniature tornado that whipped up loose dirt from the ground into a sandstorm that bore down on the avyssos. It was more forceful now. The fight with the graffant had raised its level.

"Eegh..."

The tornado struck one of the avyssos, then tore past and into the graffant's body, splattering blood everywhere. The avyssos flew into the air and landed on its back with a thud.

"Eeeeghh...!" Its eight legs undulated as it managed to flip itself back over.

"Gale!" The second tornado headed straight for the same avyssos. Once again, it tossed its body high into the air. This time it slammed down hard onto a rock, cream-colored bodily fluid spurting from its mouth.

All right! It was alive but barely—that attack did a lot of damage. It was a big deal that Allo was at the point where she could fight a monster head-on. If she managed to defeat it without any help, her levels would skyrocket.

Allo hunched over, panting. Exhausting all of her MP in one go left her tuckered out. I didn't see any changes in her skin though, so she must have had

a little mana left.

“Eeeeghhhh!” The other avyssos charged toward us, including the injured one. The ones in the back split up and vanished. I’d been watching them but lost track when they hit the trees. No choice but to ignore those two until they showed themselves. They’d have to go back to the graffant sooner or later if they wanted to keep feasting. I presumed they would target me if they returned, but I’d keep a closer eye on the lesser treant and the baby spiders to be safe. You could never anticipate what an avyssos might pull.

“Eeeghhhh!” The avyssos’s eight legs roiled as it came closer and closer.

“Earth... Ma...gic... Clay!” Allo stretched her hand out. The ground bulged, and a clay spike shot up toward the avyssos—but it hopped backward to evade it at the last second, then charged toward us again. Man, these things never gave up.

Gale had a wider range for an attack, so I felt like it’d be easier for Allo to hit them with that spell. She pressed a hand to her face. Her skin was in the same condition, but the black light enveloping her grew weaker.

Are you out of MP? Go ahead and absorb more from me. I looked at her and curled the tip of my tail upward. She nodded and hugged my tail, which transferred light into her body. The black light surrounding her intensified. While she charged up her MP, the avyssos edged so close it was virtually face-to-face with us. It was almost within reach of my tail.

Was it time for me to take a physical role in this fight? Before I could consider it seriously, Allo darted a look toward the avyssos and lifted both her arms up.

“Gale!” Gusts of wind shot out from both of her hands. They soon became tornados that circled around the avyssos once, almost careening in the other direction entirely, before suddenly closing in on it. The avyssos sped up in response, leaving the tornados behind.

Allo lifted both hands again. “Gale!” Once more, she shot out two tornados, attacking the avyssos from the front this time. The last two tornados changed directions too, so four of them were closing in on the avyssos from all sides.

Ooh, this should do a lot of damage.

Allo leaned back limply onto my curved tail. The mana surrounding her grew weak again. After firing off four full-powered spells, she was nearing her limit. She touched my tail with one hand, then reached out toward the avyssos with the other.

“Clay!” The avyssos crouched down, ready to leap between the gaps in the tornados, but the columns of clay that shot out from the ground blocked its path. Without an escape route, the four tornados closed in for good.

They converged with a roar. The blowback created an enormous squall. I shielded Allo from the fallout with my wings. I spotted some kind of tree branch blowing in the wind, heading straight toward me. I didn’t want to dodge it, so I closed my eyes, thinking it wouldn’t be a big deal if it hit me.

But as soon as the branch touched my eyelids, I felt it moving. I realized it wasn’t a tree branch at all. It was the long, black, disgusting leg from an avyssos.

“*Raar?!* ” Startled, I accidentally threw my head back, hard. I had to regain my composure in seconds and focus on not throwing Allo off. The avyssos leg fell to the ground and continued twitching.

I only took my eyes off the avyssos for a second, but now it was gone. I glanced behind myself to check on the baby spiders—and spotted an avyssos in Allo’s blind spot, leaping toward her. It had seven legs left, so it was definitely the one she’d been fighting. It wasn’t targeting me after all. It wanted Allo. Since I hadn’t participated in the battle, it had her marked as the more dangerous one.

But she hadn’t noticed it yet. I lifted my tail up high. Allo lost her balance and fell, clinging to whatever she could grab of me. The avyssos hit its head on my tail too and fell straight down. I didn’t want to intervene; I wanted her to get all the experience in the end. Allo needed rest, though. *Should I just take care of this thing now?*

As I thought that, Allo, still holding onto my tail, reached her hand out toward the avyssos. She wanted to continue. She must have really wanted to level up. If she was this serious about it, then I’d sit back and see what happened.

“Gale!” Allo sent wind magic straight toward the falling avyssos’s exposed stomach. This attack was weaker than her last; not quite a tornado, but still

strong enough to knock the avyssos away. It lifted its head, trying to get its bearings.

“Gale! Gale! Gale!” Allo cast the wind magic in succession. These tornados were even smaller and could only keep their forms for about a second each. The avyssos shrunk back, trying to bear the wind pressure.

“Eek!” A tiny gust of wind grazed Allo’s fingertips, startling her into a scream. She clutched my tail, but her arm had dried out and the gust of wind cracked it further. Her MP was too low to control the Gale spell anymore.

She touched my tail again to drain my mana. Whether it was because her Mana Drain skill was a low level, or because she wasn’t focusing enough, or whatever the reason, she couldn’t use other skills while focusing on Mana Drain. All she could do was hang on while she absorbed my MP. She certainly couldn’t keep shooting spells out like a machine gun.

“*Eeeeghhh!*” Once again, the avyssos leapt up. They were way faster than Allo.

“Ga...” She reacted far too late. Unable to switch skills in time, she couldn’t finish her spell. Her arm froze, followed by the rest of her body. The avyssos mercilessly stretched out its front legs, which were strangely thicker than the rest, and tried to pincer Allo from both sides.

Its front legs were longer than I’d thought. She wouldn’t have time to recharge her MP if it got too close. Allo had done a fine job. Surely enough to gain a good amount of experience. I lifted my foreleg to intervene and skewer the avyssos myself—when Allo’s outstretched arm swelled and reached out to grab the back of the avyssos’s head.

“*Raar?*” I blurted out, stunned. The avyssos’s body floated in the air, its legs flailing wildly.

“*Eegh? Eegh?*” The avyssos struggled, swinging its legs around. It couldn’t see, blinded by Allo’s grasp. All it could do was thrash around in a panic.

“...” Allo had impulsively grabbed on to the monster, but she didn’t know what to do next. She looked to me for help.

Is it just me or does she look like she’s gonna cry? I understood that feeling. I hated it the first time I touched one of those things too.

“Eeeghhh! Eegghhh!” The avyssos struggled harder, and Allo panicked.

Something happened with her arm—it swelled up to become larger than her whole body! Her nails grew especially ominous and sharp, like talons. It must be that one skill she had, Body Morph. Levana mages’ bodies were made from the earth, so this kind of transformation was nothing for her.

More and more strength gathered in Allo’s hand. As it grew, her nails slowly stabbed through the avyssos’s body.

“Eeghh! Eeghh!” The avyssos screamed as it writhed. Allo gulped and stared at the awful sight with resolve.

“Gale!” Mana collected in her swollen fingertips and burst forth, exploding with her shout. Her fingers and the palm of her hand broke off, and the avyssos was blown away in the blast as well. The fallout wasn’t restricted to Allo’s hand. Her entire arm, up to her shoulder, turned to sand and disappeared into the wind. Only then did her normal, slender arm reappear in its place.

“Eegh...” The avyssos, down half its legs, lay on its back and oozed fluids. It tried to stand back up with its remaining legs, but it couldn’t complete the motion. Allo touched my tail and absorbed mana from me, then stretched both of her hands out again.

“Gale!” The avyssos took the brunt of the tornado and jerked upward before slamming back toward the ground. Cream-colored liquid splattered everywhere. Even the avyssos didn’t stand a chance against that attack.

Gained 44 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 44 Experience Points.

Huh? I got experience too? I didn’t do anything! Well, on reflection, I did help Allo dodge the avyssos, lent her my MP, and raised her Magic. I guess that counted as supporting the battle. Fair enough that I earned some experience, even if I wanted her to get the full amount. Didn’t work out that way this time. Still, surely Allo got more than half the experience.

Name: Allo

Species: Levana Mage

Status: Cursed

Lv: 17/30

HP: 78/84

MP: 54/93

She went from level 14 to 17. I genuinely thought she'd receive more than that. It was harder to level when you were mid-range like her, and the avyssos she killed wasn't that high of a level either, but still...only three levels? I guessed anyone looking in on this from the outside would think that was solid growth.

Allo hung her head. She probably sensed my disappointment.

N-no, now that I think about it, gaining three levels is great! If we keep working harder, you'll evolve in no time!

Once she hit level 20, it would be even harder for her to level up, but her Magic would be higher. By then, she would make easy work of any avyssos. Now that she could absorb it from me, her MP was basically bottomless.

Those other two avyssos were lurking around somewhere. How many downed avyssos until Allo leveled up again? I did the math and figured it would be about fifteen, maybe thirty at the most.

When I did this with Ballrabbit, it was easy to level it up to rank D, but there was a high wall between ranks D and C. If it were effortless to evolve, everyone would do it all the time.

I glanced over at Allo.

Should I try to find the avyssos nest? If it did exist, we'd find our thirty avyssos, no problem. That battle would be for both Allo and the Lithovar Tribe's sakes. We could take down an avyssos nest—maybe. I could one-hit KO an avyssos, so even if I fought ten at once, I could defeat them without incurring any damage myself. Since I became an Ouroboros, I hadn't seen any monsters with stronger stats than me. Things were a little hairy during my battle with that hero, but my stats were much higher now. It was hard to believe an avyssos

could touch me.

“Graar...” Partner made a worried noise. (*“You’re not getting any funny ideas, are you?”*)

Well, the avyssos have infested the area, so we gotta keep an eye on Allo and the others. We can’t go to the village, but if we’re gone too long, the Lithovars will worry and come to the shrine. They might see Allo. So, I think we need to make a move.

Partner looked disheartened.

Listen, I don’t want to deal with the avyssos any more than you do.

(“Ah! Behind you!”)

At Partner’s warning, I turned and used Windcutter. It hit the earth and scattered a cloud of dust into the air, startling the two avyssos who had crept close to the baby spiders. They jumped backward.

Can you still fight, Allo? If so, you’ll have to defeat those two.

They were sneaky little beasts. Even if it seemed like they’d escaped, they’d keep coming back for more.

“Gale!” Allo created wind gusts that became tornadoes. The avyssos had run into the brush to hide, but the tornadoes flattened the tall grass, revealing their location. Allo immediately gathered her mana again and used her second attack.

“Gale!” A new tornado attacked the avyssos before they could get back up. Allo glanced at them and then hugged my tail, quickly charging up her MP. She was starting to get the hang of when she needed to recharge and how to time her attacks accordingly. Since she could ignore her MP and attack freely, it seemed like Gale and Clay had significantly leveled up. She kept the two avyssos in check by attacking when she had the chance and recharging her MP in between.

“Eeghh!” One of the avyssos collapsed onto the ground, spitting out fluids. It twitched and died a moment later.

Gained 36 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 36 Experience Points.

One down, one to go.

Allo started to charge up her MP, but she spotted the second avyssos midway. She let off two attacks without fully charging.

“Gale! Clay!”

The avyssos found itself wedged between a wall of clay and a raging tornado with no hope of escape. The tornado slammed the avyssos into the clay wall. It bounced off only to fall back into the tornado. I didn’t think Allo intended on doing anything besides trapping the avyssos, but it ended up becoming a nice combo attack.

Gained 43 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 43 Experience Points.

I’m getting a lot of experience here, aren’t I? True, Allo couldn’t deal with the avyssos’ rush attacks by herself, and it was difficult for her to damage them without borrowing my MP, but this was cutting into her growth.

I checked Allo’s level. Hey, she went from level 17 to 20. She was two-thirds of the way there. On the other hand, leveling was only going to get harder as she climbed. At least her Magic was also climbing higher and higher. While it would take more experience to level her, it was easier for her to mow down avyssos.

Why not take a peek at the avyssos nest? According to Hibi’s story, the hero Gagaz found an avyssos and followed it back to the nest. That sounded straightforward.

“Graar,” Partner growled weakly. She didn’t approve of this plan. (*“Can I eat this meat or what?”*) She stretched her neck toward the forgotten graffant.

Oh, right. Since we were gone for so long, I was worried the avyssos laid eggs inside of it... It should be fine though, right?

(“Why would you say something so disgusting?”)

S-sorry. It’s my fault for not letting you eat first.

While Partner and I talked, the baby spiders gathered around the avyssos' bodies. They enjoyed their meal, then scattered, leaving behind skin and legs covered in their webs. At first, I thought it was strange they left the legs, but then I saw a baby spider bite into one and walk away with it. *Guess those are snackies for later.*

Before my own snack, I checked there were no eggs laid in the graffant's wounds, just in case. It looked safe to butcher, so I dragged it on top of the large rocks and cut into its head with my claws. I made a shallow, continuous cut down its body to skin it. Cutting into its stomach, I removed its internal organs and set them aside. Finally, I sliced through its back to cut it in half.

Using my tail, I whacked the remaining meat against the rocks to drain as much blood from it as I could. I'd done this often when I was a Young Plague Dragon, but the gory smell didn't bother me as much anymore.

I cut the meat into smaller pieces and used Scorching Breath to roast them on the heated rocks. There. Grilled graffant steak. The smell of the smoke sizzling off the meat, the fat dripping off, made my stomach rumble.

This was my first beef in this world. The smell was nostalgic and stirred my appetite. Too bad I hadn't found any spices nearby, but I would live. I wanted to eat the whole pile, or at least my fill of it.

I took a big bite. Partner had eaten all the food lately, so it tasted even more delicious than usual in my mouth. I felt power rise up inside of me, emanating from my stomach. Partner liked it too, because she ate even more ravenously than usual.

("Let's hunt one of these again, okay? Okay?")

I offered some cooked meat to the baby spiders as they crowded around me. When they finished one piece, they crowded around for the next one. It didn't matter if it was cooked, raw, or even the innards, they wanted it. I left the treant alone, since it didn't seem like it would eat with its mouth. I gave Allo a small block of cooked meat too. She hesitated but placed it in her mouth.

Hm, so she *could* eat? I assumed her undead status meant it was a no go. I studied her face, which was a little sad. Could she not taste it?

Part 5

WHEN WE WERE DONE EATING, I thought of a plan. I would leave what was left of the graffant meat as bait and watch it from afar. It was complicated to comb the forest for avyssos but easy to lure them in with food. In order to find the avyssos nest, I planned to catch an avyssos and have it lead me. Once it came for the food, I'd use Windcutter to weaken it.

I glanced over at the baby spiders. They rolled around on the ground with their full bellies. I was glad they were satisfied. As I watched them playing with each other, I suddenly heard that familiar rustling noise. Two avyssos appeared.

I waited until they began to feed on the graffant and then flapped my wings to fire two Windcutters in their direction. The blades of wind struck the edges of their bodies. If they took a direct hit they'd die, so I aimed slightly off-center. Creamy fluids sputtered out of them as they were knocked back. They rolled across the ground and smacked into a tree.

"Eegh... Eeghh..."

They both staggered as they stood up. More than half of their legs had been ripped from their bodies.

All right, it's time for you to lead me back to your nest. To my surprise, as I approached the avyssos, the baby spiders beelined for them.

Huh? What are they doing? Stunned, I watched as all eight spiders bit into one of the avyssos. It tried to run away, but it was being attacked from every direction. I had to intervene, but if I wasn't careful, I'd accidentally kill the spiders. The avyssos wasn't completely incapacitated yet either. *It* could kill the spiders if it struck back.

"Eeghh!" The avyssos swung its body around, sending the baby spiders flying. Luckily, it just wanted to shake them off, so it hadn't used much force. None of the spiders seemed seriously injured.

Unfortunately, the baby spiders also didn't give up! They shot their webs

toward the avyssos in an attempt to paralyze it. It tore through the webs in no time, opened its mouth wide, and charged toward the baby cluster. With no choice left, I blasted a Windcutter at the back of the avyssos's head.

Gained 68 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 68 Experience Points.

At least one of them was left, right?

Now that the one avyssos was dead, the baby spiders clamored around its body. They really had impressive appetites.

I sighed as the baby spiders interrupted their feast to attack the other avyssos. They stopped about two paces from it and spewed webs at its spindly legs. They'd learned from getting too close to the other one.

The avyssos flailed its legs around and managed to escape their webs, but the eight spiders surrounded it, giving it no room to escape. In no time, the avyssos was incapacitated. The baby spiders closed in.

You're still hungry?! I didn't have time to stop them before they wrapped the avyssos like a spiderweb dumpling that had rolled right off someone's plate onto the ground. As the avyssos struggled, the white dumpling swayed back and forth. More like a marshmallow when it does that.

The avyssos's mouth weakly opened and closed. Seeing that, the baby spiders shot out more webs to tighten up their marshmallow dumpling. Wow, they were merciless!

Sad to say, I really didn't want them to kill the thing. Once they calmed down, I'd drag them off the avyssos and rescue it. The baby spiders were rank E monsters. It'd be hard for them to fatally wound a monster with stats so much higher than theirs.

Never thought there'd come a time when I had to rescue an avyssos, that's for sure.

Gained 63 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 63 Experience Points.

Avyssooooooooos! It suffocated! I guess that makes sense, but come on, baby

spiders. I'm trying to keep the avyssos alive! I'm gonna have to lure in another one and teach you a lesson. You're such pains!

The baby spiders weren't even interested in the curled up avyssos. They were running around, elated.

Wait a second... Don't tell me...

Species: Baby Araneae

Status: Normal

Lv: 12/12 (MAX)

HP: 9/30

MP: 1/28

The one I checked was max level.

Don't tell me they all leveled up. No, I'm sure they did because they all did the same thing. Did it have to be right now? No wonder they leveled so fast, though. They were rank E monsters but somehow slayed two avyssos. Why'd it have to be now?

They scrambled around and around, excited, so excited I was suspicious. One of them walked over to me. Partner lowered her head for the spider to approach her. Right, the baby spiders weren't huge fans of me. They wanted Partner.

She was the one who adopted them in the first place, the first one they saw when they were born. The spider didn't do anything, just kept walking around and around, now on top of Partner's face.

("What's up with them?") She eyed me with concerned.

It's okay, I think? They're getting ready to evolve.

We both watched them in silence for a time. The baby spiders suddenly stopped moving. Their heads and stomachs shook, the vibrations traveling all the way down their legs. I stared anxiously until the shaking slowed. The one on

Partner's face jumped down as it swelled like a balloon. Before, the spiders were no bigger than a human hand. Now, the spider was as big as a medium-sized dog.

Its body couldn't withstand the expansion. Its skin split near its neck. The skin covering its head split open too, dropping away and exposing the spider's insides. The skin beneath was almost like a newborn's, soft and fresh. Once it was exposed to the air, the skin, covered in something that looked like peach fuzz, kept expanding and contracting.

It must be molting. Once its body split open, the spider shed its skin like it was shucking an uncomfortable costume. To finish, it lay on its side and wiggled out of its old shell. It stood up and quivered again, and its skin hardened as it was exposed to the air.

The remaining seven spiders went through the same process. With a great deal of wriggling, they shed their old skin. Once they were done, they shivered and acclimated to the outside air. Their wiggly labors ended, they turned toward their old bodies and ate them.

I feel like I just witnessed something major.

The pattern on their bodies hadn't changed. They were still a vivid green color. They evolved into some other kind of araneae, which were supposed to be peaceful spiders...

Their mother was bigger than a human. The kids were only as big as cocker spaniels at this point. Probably one more evolution to go until they were as big as their mother. Would they calm down a bit with every evolution? I had to hope so. I checked one of their statuses.

Species: Kid Araneae

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/30

HP: 5/25

MP: 2/20

Attack: 33

Defense: 18

Magic: 24

Agility: 36

Rank: D

Special Skills:

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Falling Resistance: Lv 1

Normal Skills:

Bite: Lv 2

Spider Silk: Lv 2

Silk Spool: Lv 1

Paralyzing Silk: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Childlike Innocence: Lv —

Evil Dragon's Pet: Lv —

Master Spinner: Lv 1

Combination: Lv 3

Avyssos Eater: Lv 1

Hmm, hmm, a kid araneae, huh? Thinking back, I once had an evolution option to become a Kid Dragon.

Hey, Partner. Go ahead and heal the spiders, I said, but for some reason Partner didn't respond. Puzzled, I looked over at her. What's wrong?

Partner pressed her head to the ground, ready to face some kind of black monster that had arrived out of nowhere. The black monster's many legs undulated as it closed in on us. Startled, Partner lifted her face, but the monster shot out black silk that stuck to her scales before she could move out of the way. The monster climbed its silk up Partner's face and attached itself to her forehead.

"Graar! Graar!" My partner, shocked, tried to shake her head.

What is that thing?! It's a spider, right?

I counted the kid araneaes. There were only seven, but we'd started with eight. We were missing one. One of them was now some other kind of spider. I suspected it was the one closest to my partner. We may have had some kind of influence on it that caused it to evolve differently.

Uncertainly, I gazed at the black spider. It glared at me with a white, human-like face.

"Raaar!" I said, startled.

Taking a closer look at it, it looked like it was wearing a white mask. It wasn't a true face, more like some kind of shell. The white mask had crescent-moon eyes and a mouth that resembled a ghostly smile. There was a real mouth hidden beneath its eight crimson eyes. What in the world was this thing?

Species: Petit-Nightmare

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/45

HP: 6/58

MP: 2/60

Attack: 60

Defense: 48

Magic: 65

Agility: 45

Rank: D+

Special Skills:

Dark Type: Lv —

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 1

Poison Belt: Lv 2

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 1

Magic Resistance: Lv 2

Poison Resistance: Lv 4

Curse Resistance: Lv 2

Normal Skills:

Venom Fangs: Lv 2

Spider Silk: Lv 2

Call Allies: Lv 1

Silk Spool: Lv 1

Poison Web: Lv 2

Title Skills:

Evil Dragon's Pet: Lv — Master Spinner: Lv 4

Meanie: Lv —

Mutation: Lv —

Tenacious: Lv 5

Cunning: Lv 4

Avyssos Eater: Lv 2

Seriously? This thing's stats were so different from the other seven spiders. Why did this one have a whole bucket of skills? *Uhh, Divine Voice? A little help*

here?

Petit-Nightmare: Rank D+ Monster.

A rare evolution caused by an upbringing in a cruel environment, under the influence of powerful magic. Not only does it have a multitude of skills, but its stats are unusually high. It is feared for its high intelligence and tenacious nature.

If left alone, they become more and more uncontrollable, so adventurers are encouraged to immediately subdue them at all costs.

However, many humans have unknowingly walked right into its trap as it lay in wait.



That doesn't sound good at all. It's not gonna tell me anything about that creepy mask, huh? What'll happen if I take it off?

The masked spider was still perched on Partner. It looked innocent enough, but after hearing that description of it and reading about its skills, I wasn't sure.

A cruel environment under the influence of powerful magic.

Was this really a cruel environment? It seemed happy enough tailing behind us. Okay, the powerful magic was at least 80 or 90 percent my fault. I wasn't sure if it was the influence of us frequently casting Hi-Rest on it, or my partner casting it right before the evolution, or it could be the Dragon Scale Powder curse. There were too many variables to say what influenced the spider most.

My goal was to fulfill my promise to the spiders' mother and raise them until they were strong enough to stay alive on their own. I could release them then. I didn't have a problem doing that with peaceful araneae, but I couldn't let a petit-nightmare go, not if they enjoyed trapping adventurers.

Luckily, the petit-nightmare had Curse Resistance, so I could keep it with me as long as I wanted. It also seemed fond of Partner. The description called it tenacious, but if it was that intense about holding grudges, I bet it would love intensely too—I hoped! I wouldn't want to turn this spider against me, but it also didn't seem to want to come near me.

Go ahead and take good care of it, Partner. You're the one who wanted to care for it in the first place.

I remembered how she watched Ballrabbit and its attachment to me enviously. Maybe her wish finally came true.

Good for you, Partner. I glanced over at her. The masked spider was content atop her head.

"Kiii, kii!" A high-pitched noise emitted from the spider, like metal scraping against metal. Was it crying? Curious, I squinted to get a better look and found a bunch of purplish-red flecks on Partner's face.

("My head kinda hurts for some reason...") Oh, uh, well. Keep at it! I'm rooting for you. Um, by the way, that thing's venomous, so be careful. I doubt anything

will happen since we have Poison Resistance and Automatic HP Recovery, but still...

My nerves were still frayed, but I put them aside and resumed my avyssos hunting. My only clue to finding the nest was the legend of the hero Gagaz. I'd counted on following an avyssos back to the nest, but with both of our prime candidates dead, I had to find a new one.

("Won't that be simple, though?") My partner's thoughts interrupted my planning.

Hm? What do you mean?

"Graar!" Partner roared. Abruptly, a black light enveloped the body of the avyssos that was suffocated by the gang of baby spiders. The ball of spider silk squirmed.

Uh-oh, please don't tell me...

Title Skill "Wrongdoer" Lv 7 has become Lv 8.

Title Skill "Dastardly King" Lv 8 has become Lv 9.

It was clear she had used Soul Addition (Fake Life).

U-uh, Partner?!

("Was that a mistake?") she asked apologetically.

Um... Yeah. I know I'm not one to talk, but I don't really want those skills to level up. I don't know what to say.

There was nothing I could do. She'd already brought it back to life, and it would be too cruel to suffocate the thing again. I hooked the ball of silk with my claw and opened it up. The avyssos crawled unsteadily out.

Avyssos Zombie: Rank E Monster.

An avyssos body possessed by an evil spirit.

At least its name is easy to understand. How come it's not a rank F monster though? I wondered if a monster's former rank made a difference on its Fake Life version.

"Ee-ghh..." The avyssos zombie stared at me, then started moving its spindly

legs. I was never going to get used to this skill.

The spiders once again approached its body. *Please don't tell me they're trying to eat it again.* I tried using my leg to swat them away, but with seven of them, it was a never-ending task.

"Kiii, kii!" The petit-nightmare, still on my partner's head, released a shrill noise. The other spiders stopped in their tracks and trembled. Quickly, they streamed away from the avyssos zombie. Huh. They followed its orders. It made sense they had a way to communicate with each other. The petit-nightmare saw me having trouble and sent a life raft. The Divine Voice's description was right—it was an intelligent creature.

"Kiikii, kiii!"

It kept making that high-pitched screech with that creepy smile on its mask. I wasn't gonna be usurped by an araneae, was I?

"Eegh, eeghh!" The avyssos zombie opened its wide mouth in the direction of the retreating spiders. The edges of its mouth split, and liquid poured out. I quickly swept my front leg to beat the avyssos zombie back. It went tumbling.

"Eegh, aghh!" The avyssos zombie jumped back up, giving me a hostile look. Great. It viewed me as the enemy.

I can't do this... We had established that Allo held some memories of her past life, so this avyssos might have its instincts and memories of its killer. If that was the case, it wouldn't let me follow it without a fight. Time for threats.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!" I gathered mana into my throat and then roared a very loud Bellow. The rushing noise engulfed everything. In the aftermath, it was quiet. The avyssos zombie took the brunt of it. At first, it trembled, but then it froze.

Normal Skill "Bellow" Lv 2 has become Lv 3.

That *was* a pretty good one, if I did say so myself. If I practiced a bit more, I might raise the effectiveness. It would be a convenient way to get lower-level monsters out of the way, so I ought to practice it more often.

"Eeg...ghh..." The avyssos zombie turned thorax and ran. I felt guilty, but at

least I could follow it. Several of its legs were torn off, so it walked unsteadily, and its low stats made it slower. It was simple for me to trail it. The trade-off was that I was losing my patience.

Partner was also quite irritated as she glared at the avyssos zombie. Near her, every time the spiders started wandering off, the petit-nightmare gave them a stern look and ushered them back in formation. I was glad they had a leader.

It wasn't tough to follow the avyssos zombie, but it was tiresome dealing with the monsters who appeared to snack on the injured avyssos along the way. I used Windcutter for the experience or Bellow to scare them away while I followed it.

At some point, as I watched the avyssos zombie's thin legs carry it farther and farther, I started to think it was almost cute. Either I felt protective after keeping it out of harm's way, I'd finally adjusted to its creepy appearance, or I felt a sense of responsibility for it since I was the reason it was alive again in the first place.

("You're not getting any strange ideas, are you?") My partner glared at me.

No! I was just wondering what happens when an avyssos zombie evolves...

("Don't you dare.") I mean, we brought it back to life! Shouldn't we take responsibility for it?

("Don't you dare!") My partner was vehemently against any idea that involved taking the avyssos zombie under our wings, so to speak. I guessed I couldn't blame her. *("It was just trying to attack us.")* Yeah, but I checked its status, and it does say "Evil Dragon's Servant." The treant follows my orders, so it clearly has an effect on it. Maybe it's realized that I've protected it?

Sometimes I noticed the avyssos zombie pausing to turn around and inspect me. I couldn't read its face, but I thought I sensed a change in its demeanor.

("Don't. You. Dare!") R-right...

The farther we went, the tougher it got. The trees grew thicker and were harder to maneuver around. The ground was harder too. The bloodied bodies of half-eaten monsters lay strewn across the path. Without much warning, we came to a chasm, or more accurately, a large crack in the earth. At any rate, the

avyssos zombie glanced back at me once more, as though in confirmation, before it jumped into the abyss.

Part 6

HAVING WATCHED THE avyssos zombie plummet into the unknown, I turned to find Allo. We made eye contact—then I followed the avyssos into the dark. The walls of the chasm were sharply angled, so I used my claws to carefully guide my way down. The spiders were apparently experts at navigating this type of terrain. They easily rappelled down the sides of the chasm. The lesser treant used its branches to make the descent along with us.

I noticed I couldn't see Allo. At first, I thought she hadn't made the jump, so I stopped. The avyssos zombie didn't wait, but at this point I figured I could find the nest on my own. It was likely to be at the bottom somewhere.

A thumping noise drew my attention. Turning, I spotted Allo with an abnormal third arm emerging from her back. The arm was about as thick as her neck and had ferocious talons at the end. Her clothes were pulled down and off her shoulder, perhaps so she wouldn't rip a hole in them with her new appendage. Though, they were already in tatters, so it didn't really matter if they got stretched out.

Allo's third arm came reaching down into the empty space. It made for a grotesque sight.

"...Ah." Once we made eye contact, she squeaked and her shoulder jumped. She paused. For some reason, she was more embarrassed about her new arm than the state of her clothes. It seemed she didn't like witnesses when she deviated from her human form. Politely, I turned away as if nothing were amiss.

"Eegh, eegh... Eeeghhh!"

"Eegh? Eegh! Eeggghhh?"

The call of the avyssos zombie came from below. I looked down to spot it and three other avyssos turning their heads up toward us. Where did they arrive from so suddenly? I looked around. There were several tough, gnarled trees growing from the walls of the chasm. I remembered I was in enemy territory, an avyssos nest, and changed gears.

Thump, thump, thump, thump... Thuuuuuump!

The fearsome noise resounded throughout the chasm. I impulsively turned around, making eye contact with Allo again. She nearly slipped but managed to hang on with her talons.

I must've startled her because her body pitched to the side, and her talons released from the wall. She fell through the air. I quickly spread out my wings to try to catch her, but before I could do that, the lesser treant caught her with its trunk.

Allo stared at me.

"Raar." I apologized by bowing my head. Allo held onto the lesser treant's trunk and frantically shook her head while flailing her arms and legs. Somehow, she wasn't blaming me.

She tried to climb down from the treant, the huge arm on her back slowly retreating back into her body. She tugged on her tousled clothes to straighten them out. Once she was done, I faced forward again.

Right—the avyssos! I'd been so distracted by Allo's danger, I forgot to keep my attention on them.

"Eegh?" The avyssos zombie turned toward me and bared its broken fangs.

"Eegh! Eegh, eegh!" It spat its sticky fluid toward me.

Never mind; it hadn't grown fond of me after all. Fear prickled my flank as I checked my surroundings. There were avyssos lined up on every inch of the wall I'd descended, assembled in some kind of battle formation.

The vibes in the air were awful. Avyssos bristled at me no matter where I looked. The gaps between them were large, but I was still surrounded.

I counted close to fifty of them. That meant hundreds of legs undulating, generating that creepy noise. I was besieged by grossness. Getting the first strike and then running if it was too much was my plan, but they'd surrounded me. Not only that, but I was also on rocky, uneven, and unfamiliar terrain.

I should've realized the zombie avyssos was against me from the beginning.

"Eeghh! Eegh! Eeeghh, eeeghh! Eeeghhh! Eeghh! Eeegh!"

The sinister cries overlapped, ruining my concentration.

If I hadn't let down my guard, I could have kept the upper hand. From my other battles with the avyssos, I'd assumed they weren't that smart. After all, they kept attacking me even though I was way out of their league. I realized now that they *only* attacked monsters that outranked them because of their habit of laying eggs in them. They didn't care if one of their kind died here and there, so long as their species won out in the end. They reminded me of the red ants. I'd underestimated them.

"Eegh, eeghhhhh, eeeeghhhhh!" The avyssos zombie gnashed its broken teeth, trying to provoke me. Had it let the others know I was coming? I'd chased off several avyssos along the way, the opposite of making friends. It might have warned them. I hated myself for considering raising this thing as my own.

The avyssos zombie turned and crawled toward its comrades. But then it stopped. Even though I was far away, I still saw it—the way the avyssos looked at the avyssos zombie was different.

"Eeghh?" The moment the avyssos zombie backed up, five other avyssos charged toward it.

"Eeeghhhhh!" Animalistic screams rang out. The avyssos zombie's body fell toward the bottom of the chasm. I'd seen normal, living avyssos eat their own kind before, but apparently, they also ate zombies. Awful. But I didn't have time to mourn the avyssos zombie. If I wasn't careful, we'd end up with the same fate.

"Raar!" I kicked off the wall and flapped my wings to stay airborne. I couldn't take on this many avyssos in unstable terrain and protect Allo and the others at the same time. Unfortunately, for both my enemies and my comrades, I needed a safe distance to fight freely.

"Raar!" I flew downward, still roaring, toward Allo. As I flew closer to the wall, she jumped and caught onto my back.

"...!"

All right, I could give Allo backup while she attacked the avyssos along the walls. I wished I could carry everyone out safely, but it would be tricky to scoop

up the spiders—who were in a skittery panic—and run away fast enough. For now, I needed to defeat a chunk of these avyssos.

Something flew toward me and dropped onto my back.

“Kiikii!” The petit-nightmare. It must have used its silk like a zip line to reach me.

I kind of wanted you to lead the other spiders.

“Eeeggh!” Three avyssos dove at me, but I whacked them with my tail, slamming them against the opposite wall.

There’s no way I’m letting you guys on board! Full up!

The avyssos were still moving, even after that impact. Man, they were tough. A larger group of them crawled up the walls, aiming for the lesser treant and the spiders. As I hovered in the air, I fired Windcutter to keep the avyssos in check and deal damage to them at the same time. Body fluids splattered everywhere, sticking to the walls. Eurgh.

Gained 456 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 456 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 72 has become Lv 73.

Three down. Hey, this was a prime spot for hunting! They couldn’t reach me from up here. The only drawback was that the lesser treant and the spiders were in danger. I had to be fast.

Take that!

Gained 156 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 156 Experience Points.

And that!

Gained 192 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 192 Experience Points.

How about that?

Gained 138 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 138 Experience Points.

And this!

Gained 204 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 204 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 73 has become Lv 74.

Title Skill “Pest Killer” Lv 6 has become Lv 7.

I started making my way through the rest of the avyssos. New ones climbed over the bodies of their fallen comrades in pursuit of the treant. Allo, who had finally charged up her MP to max level, shot out Gale to knock the avyssos from the wall. The petit-nightmare shot out its webs to catch and throw the avyssos into the depths of the chasm. Even the treant whapped its branches in a frantic attack.

As for the spiders—the kid araneae—they were all over the place, shooting silk and making simple webs to trap the avyssos along the walls. The webs slowed the avyssos down, so I could use Windcutter once they were tangled and stuck. I was a little worried with the spiders scattered all about, but with the rest of us watching over them from a distance, we managed to protect them.

We kept to the same strategy: I would beat the monsters back with Windcutter, while Allo and the petit-nightmare would deal with the ones that escaped the wind blades. Partner took care of any stragglers using Death and pepped up our teammates with Hi-Rest.

Avyssos fell into the chasm, one after the other. My level climbed to 75, then 76, and kept climbing. I was level 78 before I knew it. A good fight so far, but the eye of the storm crept closer and closer to the lesser treant and the spiders. Since the scope of the battle was smaller, it was easier than ever to target the avyssos. I could count the ones left pretty easily. I decided to try to get rid of them all at once.

“*Raaaaaaaaar!*” I roared, letting Allo and the petit-nightmare know to be careful. They paused and held fast to my back. I channeled as much mana into both of my wings as I could, then thrust out all at once.

Windcutter required the use of both of my wings, so it was hard to stay airborne. The kickback from the wind blades was brutal. I swung my tail around to the front and managed to somersault backward to keep myself steady, then returned to my original stance. The two Windcutters intersected, decimating four avyssos along the wall.

Gained 450 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 450 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 78 has become Lv 79.

Title Skill “Pest Killer” Lv 7 has become Lv 8.

Normal Skill “Windcutter” Lv 6 has become Lv 7.

The spot where there had once been avyssos was now a crater in the wall. Pieces of their legs, parts of their bodies, and sand were scattered everywhere. There were only about ten of them left. Right as I thought I’d exterminated all the ones on the wall, a huge avyssos crawled out from a hole there.

It was nearly twice the size of a normal avyssos, though much slower. It was strangely intimidating as it crawled, one heavy step after the other.

As I stopped to wonder what the heck it was, another one appeared. Avyssos holes lay directly above and below where the treant and spiders still fought. These new, large avyssos’s legs undulated as they made their steady way toward my comrades.

“Eeeeeeeeghhhhhhhhhhhh!” Its cry was deep and booming, almost like the wail of a man in anguish. Wh-what the heck was this thing, anyway? I didn’t know there were monsters down here with higher ranks.

Heavy Avyssos: Rank C+ Monster.

A larger type of evolved avyssos with an appetite that outweighs that of its smaller counterparts. The surface of its body is frighteningly tough and cannot be easily penetrated.

For this reason, its skin is sometimes fashioned into shields.

H-heavy avyssos? This one specialized in defense, apparently. I had no idea this type existed. I thought I’d already had my fill of avyssos for the day.

Once the other avyssos heard the larger ones' cries, they pursued my comrades with renewed aggression. I watched as one avyssos, spooked by the cry and trying to escape, ended up trampled by its remaining companions.

"Gale!" Allo used my mana to create a magical tornado, aiming for the lower heavy avyssos. Her attack landed—there was a rumbling noise, and the surface of the wall crumbled, flying into the air. But the heavy avyssos only faltered briefly before it charged forward again. Allo's spells were decently powerful after all that leveling up, yet they weren't making a dent in the heavy avyssos.

I quickly shot off a Windcutter. The blades of wind hit the heavy avyssos's back, leaving behind a large fissure from which bodily fluid gushed out. Still, the heavy avyssos kept trudging on. I focused even more MP to my wings and once again loosed a Windcutter.

The heavy avyssos trampled over the bodies of its fallen comrades to avoid the spiderwebs. When it ran out of bodies to use as stepping stones, it switched to walking on the web-covered walls. It took wide steps to try to combat the stickiness of the web. While it concentrated on retaining its mobility, a single thread of silk shot out from elsewhere and attached itself to the heavy avyssos.

"Eegh?"

It was the petit-nightmare's silk. It had used the impact from my Windcutter to jump backward and onto my back, spewing its silk as it went. The force from its jump pulled on the silk, jerking the heavy avyssos away from the chasm wall.

"Eeghhhhh!" The heavy avyssos let out a deep, animalistic howl as it lost its grip and swung like a pendulum.

"Kii, kii!"

The thread broke. The heavy avyssos's giant body hurtled down toward the bottom of the chasm. I waited until I heard a sharp thud.

Gained 156 Experience Points

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 156 Experience Points.

Since I helped it, I earned experience too. Man, the petit-nightmare was ruthless.

Meanwhile, the final heavy avyssos couldn't endure the blow from a second Windcutter. It bled violently as it slid downward.

"Eegh, eegh, eeeghh!" It gained speed, falling even faster. Several legs flew off before it disappeared into the dark. I heard another thud.

Gained 250 Experience Points

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 250 Experience Points.

You guys aren't suited for staying alive in this nest.

Witnessing the fates of their heavier counterparts, the other avyssos decided to focus on escape instead.

Who knew how many Windcutters I'd fired, and Allo had absorbed plenty of my mana on top of that. It was time to recharge. With the avyssos in retreat, I flew to the top of the chasm to rest.

"Raar..." I stretched my neck out onto the ground. Allo climbed down from my back and worriedly touched my cheek. Not long after, the lesser treant and the spiders crawled back down too.

Oh, that's right—I wanted to check and see how much they leveled. They fought hard this time, so I'm sure they got a lot of experience from the battle. I went ahead and checked their statuses.

Name: Allo

Species: Levana Mage

Status: Cursed

Lv: 28/30

HP: 69/114

MP: 56/126

Species: Lesser Treant

Status: Cursed

Lv: 11/25

HP: 19/25

MP: 2/60

Species: Kid Araneae

Status: Normal

Lv: 9/30

HP: 4/57

MP: 2/36

Species: Petit-Nightmare

Status: Normal

Lv: 12/45

HP: 23/101

MP: 2/93

Allo only had two more levels to go. She wasn't ready to evolve yet, but she was close. Once the lesser treant saw the expression on my face, the hollows that formed its eyes winced, and it hung its head apologetically. It was such a pitiable sight, I bowed my head too.

N-no, please, you're always so helpful. I look forward to working more with you!

The petit-nightmare had leveled up far more than the other spiders. It was a fast learner, dropping into the middle of the fight but staying in a safe place to shoot its silk. The treant could learn a lot from its strategy. It had already surpassed the treant in levels.

With Allo's evolution so close, I really wanted to level her up further. I was sure more avyssos lay in wait. What we fought was probably just the vanguard. Once I thought about all the avyssos we'd seen throughout the village and

forest, there must be more than fifty in the nest. There were certainly more at the bottom of the abyss. If we fought them, Allo could reach her max level.

It was time. I considered Allo. At first, she was nothing but a pile of bones. Then, she evolved into a skeleton mage that controlled magic. Although her skin and hair were dried out, she had a discernible human form. Perhaps with her next evolution, she'd be almost indistinguishable from a living person.

I walked a few steps and peered toward the bottom of the chasm. It was dark and distant, but from my perspective, it appeared flat at the bottom. Rugged black tree branches stuck out from the walls here and there, and several holes dotted the walls as well. The dead bodies of fallen monsters littered the ground. Eerie silence permeated everything.

Using Psychic Sense, I scanned the pit and felt a peculiar number of blank spaces. The avyssos possessed the skill to conceal themselves. Would a large group using their skills at the same time create those blank spaces, like an illusion of lifelessness?

Suddenly, I understood why they were called avyssos—they embodied the word “abyss.”

Maybe I should leave everyone but Allo here.

If a monster attacked, the petit-nightmare could take cover during the fight, or it could team up with the other spiders and the treant. The group could take on a single avyssos together, but there was no guarantee only one avyssos would attack at a time.

If I paid attention to Psychic Sense and hurried back, they should be fine. Just in case, I asked my partner to use Hi-Rest on everyone to raise their HP to max. Next, I let Allo absorb my MP. Once I saw the black light surround her body, I stopped.

“Raar,” I roared at the petit-nightmare. It was crawling near Partner but stopped when it heard me. I turned my head to the side, and it followed my gaze to the rest of the spiders, who were carrying parts of the avyssos bodies for food. Once the petit-nightmare realized I wanted it to babysit, it snootily turned its face away from me and used a burst of spider silk to climb on top of my partner's head.

Can you ask it, Partner?

She paused for a moment before glancing upward. *"Graar."*

The petit-nightmare climbed down and studied her.

"Kii! Kii!" it cried in response. Without further complaint, it walked over to the other spiders.

I guess it worked?

With that done, I turned to Allo. She made eye contact with me and then glanced over at the chasm. She nodded with resolve. I wasn't sure if she was determined to jump down the chasm with me or if it was something more: her resolve to get back her human form.

Part 7

ALLO RODE on my back as I glided down the chasm. I spread my wings wide to slow down as we approached the bottom. With Psychic Sense, the closer I got to the bottom, the more I could *feel* the avyssos' presence, like a weight. A chill ran down my spine, and goosebumps rose along my scales.

"Eeegh, eegh, eegh... Eeghh!"

The cries of the avyssos echoed below. The sound bounced off the walls, creating a cacophony. The further I descended, the more humid it felt and the darker it grew.

Finally, the avyssos became visible. I thought I was used to them, but seeing that many avyssos crawling in a horrible mass made my skin crawl right along with them. They gnashed their teeth at me, drool pouring out of their mouths in a clear threat. More avyssos skittered out from the holes along the walls. They glared at me with open hostility. This was close enough.

Allo, tear 'em to pieces.

Allo leaned forward, absorbing mana from me. Once our eyes met, she nodded and stood.

"...Clay."

She stretched her hand out at the group of avyssos. The earth buckled, and a huge column shot out from within it. The avyssos scattered. Bodily fluids splattered against the ground as they flew into the air. It wasn't a fatal blow, but it must have hurt.

"...Gale."

The avyssos panicked as Allo's tornado slammed into them. Distracted by the terrain change, they didn't have time to escape or to fight. The tornado sent them flying to the four winds, knocking their bodies into the walls.

Things were in our favor, and I thought the rest of the battle would go smoothly, until I saw something that shocked me. There was a large object the

avyssos crowded around—the yellowed corpse of a large dragon. Thick yellow strands of something twisted around its eye sockets and ribs. Tiny, greenish, and transparent avyssos bodies wriggled within the desiccated dragon carcass.

The babies.

Their bodies were mostly green like the adult avyssos, but their faces and rear-ends were a vibrant orange color. Their long orange legs overlapped each other, reminiscent of a pile of soggy ramen noodles. Their legs intertwined with the strange, gooey threads. To be honest, I didn't want to observe them for any more detail than that.

“*Graa...*” Partner tossed her head, letting out a roar. What we were looking at was a dragon who'd been overpowered by the avyssos. Once dead, they laid their eggs in it. If I died here, that would be our fate.

I didn't have time to dwell on it. It was awful, but I had more pressing worries. Still, the thing I couldn't look away from was...

The dragon carcass had two heads.

“Dra...gon...God...?” Allo murmured haltingly.

H-he was eaten. Everyone said that he disappeared. In reality, he was eaten by the avyssos! What the hell is going on here, huh?!

I flew upward to put distance between the late dragon god and myself. The avyssos dove off the walls, but I beat them away with my wings. Allo seemed as shocked as I was. How was I supposed to explain this to her?

Wait! Was it really the dragon god?

Amphis: Rank C+ Monster.

A gentle, two-headed dragon.

They enjoy eating avyssos, which pose a threat to humans. Forest-dwelling humans revere the dragon for this reason.

Amphis are not intelligent enough to understand why they're worshipped by humans, but the attention makes them blissfully happy.

Dragon Gooooooooooooood?!

Oh no. The dragon god wasn't nearly as strong as I expected he would be. I thought he'd at least be a B- monster, but he was a C+ monster who ended up as avyssos chow. At least I had wings, so I could fly away from dangerous situations. I also relied on my skills. Things must have gone south for this guy, and he ended up in a dank pit like this.

No wonder he couldn't beat the Manticore; there was no way. He didn't eat the avyssos to actively save the humans either. He was too simple to understand their devotion.

I understood why Hibi was so suspicious of me whenever we conversed. I doubted the other dragon god could carry a conversation at all. I bet she became doubtful when I asked her too many questions.

It was no surprise they thought the dragon god skipped out on them every few years. It wasn't one dragon—I bet every Amphis met this same fate. That was why it took so long for them to reappear. They had to wait until another Amphis randomly moved in. It wouldn't surprise me if two showed up at once at some point!

And then they suggested offering human sacrifices to the Manticore?

Ahh, I had to think about that later. There was a battle to wage with the avyssos in front of me.

I glanced back at Allo, who was still on my back. She looked back and forth between me and the dragon god's carcass. She fixed her gaze on me and shook her head slightly, before standing and lifting both her hands.

"Gale!"

Two magic tornados spiraled from her hands and stormed along the ground, trampling the avyssos. I used my wings to beat back the ones that leapt from above.

We can do this. This is easy. Maybe I was overthinking things before. The ones crawling on the ground couldn't reach me. They were sitting ducks for Allo.

Gained 44 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 44 Experience Points.

Finally, one of the avyssos died, and the Divine Voice notified me of my share of experience points. After that, a group of injured avyssos gave out, screaming and dying all at once. The notification screens with experience points flashed and disappeared busily in my mind.

The avyssos babies, wound around the dragon god's carcass, were also caught up in Allo's Gale. Flung into the air, their fragile bodies spewed bodily fluids. They were converted into experience in no time.

The avyssos finally realized they didn't stand a chance. They retreated into their holes. Of course, I was much too big to fit inside and follow. I bet there were tons of them lurking in those holes, but I didn't want to imagine it.

Unless I wiped out the avyssos, neither the Lithovar Tribe nor I would have peace. It was imperative I defeat the ones that scampered to safety.

Should I bust down the walls? Should I stick something long and pointy inside? Should I roast up a yummy monster and lure them out with the meat?

While my mind worked, I sank toward the ground. I wanted to pay my respects to the previous dragon god. Its bones were infested with gross, gooey yellow strings and the baby avyssos' dead bodies. It was too sad to bear. At the very least. I could clean up his bones.

Allo poked my back, so I turned to her. She had her hands outstretched and was flapping them around.

Huh? What is it? Oh, wait. Maybe...

Name: Allo

Species: Levana Mage

Status: Cursed, Magic Modifier

Lv: 30/30 (MAX)

HP: 116/116

MP: 98/132

Hey, hey! You reached max level! I was so thrilled about Allo leveling up that I landed in front of the dragon god's bones and didn't even care that I stomped on several avyssos bodies. It was a far cry from when I first saw them and thought I might lose my mind. What was frightening *now* was how used to them I was.

Allo carefully climbed down from my back. Warily, I watched the many holes dug into the walls. They were various sizes, but each one was made for an avyssos. Even a human would have to hunch over to get inside. I suspected the largest holes were for the heavy avyssos. If I used Human Transformation, could I get inside? Hunched over and blind to the dark, I wouldn't be able to fight if I did.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem like the avyssos were coming back out.

"...?" Allo fidgeted nervously but silently.

If this evolution restored her human body, would she go back to the village? I hesitated.

("Aren't you gonna let her evolve?")

Yeah. I am. Go ahead, Partner.

She nodded and focused on Allo. "*Graar!*" she roared, and a black light surrounded Allo. My partner had used her Soul Addition (Fake Life) skill.

The black light made a preternatural buzzing noise, unpleasant and shrill. Worried, I stepped forward. In a flash, the black light expanded. I squeezed my eyes shut. When I opened them, the black light was mixing with the air and dissipating.

A white hand stretched out from the light. It wasn't made of earth. At least, it didn't seem that way. On the other hand, it didn't look like it was made of flesh either. But it was inarguably a little girl's arm.

The black light cleared. A pair of red eyes stared at me. They radiated with mana. The figure's hair, skin, and eyes were different from before, but the outline of her face, her height, and the length of her hair were the same. I saw the outline of her former self. This was Allo.

She blinked when she saw the wonder in my eyes. She hesitantly lifted her arms to inspect them. The moment she touched her skin, her entire body trembled, and her knees buckled. She sat down on the floor over the cavern and hugged her own body. I thought she might weep with happiness.

At last, she'd done it. Her skin was ghostly pale and her eyes were otherworldly red with large pupils, so she wasn't a normal human, but she was different from any other undead form she'd inhabited. In fact, she didn't look undead anymore.

I wanted to find out more about this new Allo.

Levana Low Lich: Rank C+ Monster.

Able to manipulate the earth at will to create a transitory physical body.

Has a strong attachment to the living and often lures foolish humans to their doom.

By the time the humans realize what's happening, they're already a part of the Levana Low Lich's frenzied feast.

C+, huh? She's a fairly high rank now. I bet her next evolution will be Levana Lich. The description seemed a bit threatening. She was okay, right? Allo was still Allo...right?

Name: Allo

Species: Levana Low Lich

Status: Cursed

Level: 1/65

HP: 138/138

MP: 38/154

Attack: 88

Defense: 76

Magic: 151

Agility: 65

Rank: C+

Special Skills:

Grecian Language: Lv 4

Undead: Lv —

Dark Type: Lv —

Body Morph: Lv 5

Privilege of the Dead: Lv —

Master of the Earth: Lv —

Evil Eye: Lv 1

Resistance Skills:

Debuff Resistance: Lv —

Physical Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Resistance: Lv 4

Normal Skills:

Gale: Lv 6

Poor Curse: Lv 4

Life Drain: Lv 4

Clay: Lv 6

Regenerate: Lv 3

Clay Doll: Lv 5

Mana Drain: Lv 5

Lingering Rope: Lv 1

Fog of the Dead: Lv 1

Title Skills:

Evil Dragon's Minion: Lv —

Hollow Mage: Lv 6

Everlasting Body: Lv —

W-wait, these are her stats at level one? Is it just me or is she, like, really strong?!

Were all C+ monsters this strong? Allo could lay waste to the whole avyssos nest by herself if I leveled her, depending on how well she learned to use Mana Drain.

On the other hand, she was loaded with suspicious skills now. Let's see, "Master of the Earth" sounded self-explanatory. But what about "Privilege of the Dead," "Evil Eye," "Lingering Rope," "Fog of the Dead," and "Everlasting Body"?

She's okay, right? I have no clue what any of those skills are capable of.

I was apprehensive, but then Allo stood up and stared at me. She saw her reflection in my eyes and grabbed onto my face, thrilled. *Hey, that tickles!* I reflexively lifted my head. She reached back out toward me and puffed out her cheeks.

Allo's touch had startled me because her skin was as soft as any human's. She wasn't warm, but her skin was like dirt no longer. It was hard to believe it was created from the earth at all.

After a moment, she looked behind me at the dragon god's bones. It was covered in that gross yellow goo, the dead avyssos babies, and their bodily fluids. Studying it more closely, I realized the gooey strings were bubble nests, the same things fish and frogs used to protect their eggs.

I turned to watch Allo walk over to the dragon god's bones. She stared at it for a while, then back at me. I thought she might be suspicious of me for taking the dragon god's place in the shrine, but I was wrong.



“Poor thing,” she said quietly.

I nodded. The dragon god, defeated so thoroughly by the avyssos, really was a tragic sight. With a deep sigh, I collected mana in my throat and used Scorching Breath on the dragon god’s bones. The flames burned off the bubble nests and dead avyssos babies. The fire rumbled as it burned the rotting meat and earth within the bones, leaving the ground scorched. When I was finished, all that was left behind were the clean bones. Allo returned to the dragon god’s bones and gently stroked his head.

“Thank you, Dragon God. Rest in peace...” Allo spoke smoothly now, her voice no longer dry and halting. She understood that the bones belonged to the two-headed dragon the tribe had once worshipped. Silently, I watched her mourn him.

I-I’m not jealous or anything. Promise!

“Um, Dragon God?” Her voice sounded unsure.

Feeling guilty, I winced, but there was no suspicion nor hostility in her wide red eyes. Could the Lithovar Tribe have always known the dragon god wasn’t a single dragon but a role passed down through the generations? Perhaps that was why Hibi hadn’t said anything to me about it.

I had many questions, like what Hibi actually thought of me. I awkwardly turned my face away, only to startle at the sound of myriad legs skittering.

“Raar!”

As I roared, an avyssos dropped out of one of the holes. I whipped my head around to check the others and found a huge number of avyssos streaming out from the same hole. Some landed on their backs, legs undulating wildly.

Wh-what the heck? What is going on?

An unsettling, thick, blue-black feeler stretched out from the hole. Right as I realized that must’ve been what pushed out the flood of avyssos, it whacked into Allo’s body.

It was too fast to comprehend; I couldn’t react in time. Allo flew through the air. I kicked off the ground and chased after her, snapping my tail out to grab

her before she slammed against the wall. Afraid she would be crushed from the sudden stop, I curved my tail to lessen the force.

“Oww...” she moaned. Her clothes were torn across her stomach, where the tentacle struck. She wasn’t bleeding, but it took a chunk out of her. It was a grotesque sight. To think, she hadn’t even taken the full force of the attack! I saved her, yet she’d taken this much damage. I needed to be careful.

The wriggling feeler stretched out from its hole. It was longer than anything I’d seen on a normal avyssos. What in the world was inside that nest?

“Eeeegggghhhhh!” A high-pitched, explosive noise echoed around us. The wall nearest the feeler began to crumble away.

Part 8

AS THE WALL CRUMBLED, a cloud of dust rose into the air. There was *something* on the other side, something with an overwhelmingly intimidating presence. The dust obscured its form, but I could tell from its silhouette that it was larger than I was. Those tentacle-like feelers protruded from its abnormally long, midnight-blue body. The avyssos boss had appeared. My gut told me that defeating it would end the overbreeding of the avyssos altogether.

The other avyssos skittered around wildly, meaning the floor was fast becoming creepy-crawly lava that I did not want either of us to touch. I stretched my tail out to Allo, who quickly hopped on and climbed up my back.

“Eeeeeghhhhhhhhh!” Once again that high-pitched shriek resounded.

The dust cleared, and at last I faced the giant avyssos. It had four glinting eyes and abnormally long feelers of different lengths growing out of its head. They waved wildly back and forth. The tentacles were bad, but the absolute worst part was the writhing mass of baby avyssos riding on its back amidst a cluster of yellow egg sacs.

The babies churned around each other as if trying to find the space where they belonged on the giant back. I noticed indentations on the giant avyssos’s back and realized the babies were taking bites out of their transport, like tiny parasites.

Honestly, the horrible scene before me made me want to run away. Even Partner was speechless and stared at the thing, stunned.

Species: Mother

Status: Fury (Major)

Lv: 81/85

HP: 722/722

MP: 285/325

Attack: 555

Defense: 647

Magic: 364

Agility: 481

Rank: B+

Special Skills:

Myriapod: Lv —

Undercover: Lv (MAX)

Dark Type: Lv —

Automatic HP Recovery: Lv 7

Psychic Sense: Lv 4

Tentacles: Lv 8

Chitin: Lv 8

Big Breeder: Lv 8

Food Regeneration: Lv 7

Resistance Skills:

Physical Resistance: Lv 7

Magic Resistance: Lv 6

Falling Resistance: Lv (MAX) Poison Resistance: Lv 9

Paralysis Resistance: Lv 5

Confusion Resistance: Lv 5

Normal Skills:

Burrow: Lv 8

Paralyzing Bite: Lv 9

Acid Drool: Lv 7

Diseased Breath: Lv 8

Clay Wall: Lv 6

Tentacle Lash: Lv 6

Gravity: Lv 7

Gravidon: Lv 8

Physical Barrier: Lv 5

Title Skills:

Mutation: Lv — Mother Avyssos: Lv —

Cannibal: Lv 8

Many Children: Lv MAX

Final Evolution: Lv —

Calamity: Lv 8



You've gotta be kidding me. I definitely underestimated them. Even though my stats were higher, Mother's stats were still outrageous. This monster had lurked underground this whole time?! Now I saw why there were so many avyssos crawling around during the breeding season. This thing was chilling underground unbothered, constantly hatching more horrible babies!

Mother: Rank B+ Monster.

The queen avyssos, capable of living hundreds of years.

After she lays her eggs, she incubates a portion of them on top of her own body, where they eat her flesh as a form of parasitism.

Once those babies mature, they become elite avyssos who protect Mother.

After she mates with her partner, he dies and becomes her meal.

As I looked at Mother, I realized there were a bunch of heavy avyssos around her.

Species: Mother's Guard

Status: Fury (Major), Defense Modifier

Lv: 43/65

HP: 458/458

MP: 143/143

No, they weren't heavy avyssos. They were special bodyguards with super-high levels! What the heck was up with them? I couldn't believe this whole group had over 400 HP. On top of that, they had Defense Modifier due to Mother's Physical Barrier. If there were more of these things in hiding, this battle would never end.

Mother crawled over to the dragon god's bones, bent her legs, and sat down. Mother's guards surrounded her, crawling over the bones, sinking them down

into the earth with their weight.

I swung my tail, sending the nearest avyssos flying through the air. As I hovered in midair at a safe distance, I shot a Windcutter down at Mother.

She would be one of the toughest enemies I'd faced thus far, but if I attacked relentlessly and caught her in between her regeneration cycles, eventually she'd run out of steam. After all, my Attack stats were high, *and* my rank was higher.

I shot off two more blades of wind, but a guard jumped out and took both attacks in her stead. Windcutter sliced through its body and creamy fluids exploded out. Despite that, it didn't break its stance; it landed on its feet and dug in so it wouldn't collapse.

The wounded guard circled around back and another took its place.

"Wind magic, Gale!" It was Allo's turn, and she sent out a tornado that traveled across the ground. Once again, Mother's guard intercepted it, and it dissipated. The Gale did not even do much damage to the guard.

It was probably because Allo was freshly evolved. Even though she used my magic power to do so, she was no match for the level 40 Mother's guards. Her level wasn't high enough. She needed to hunt more regular avyssos first.

The tentacles on Mother's head lashed out toward me. While I thought I was way out of her reach, they hit the spot right below my feet. Hovering in the air didn't give me an advantage after all.

I dodged the tentacles, then bit into them with my fangs. Mother's bodily fluids oozed into my mouth. Lukewarm, with a distinctive bitter stench, but most of all—it tasted disgusting. Ugh, I couldn't think about it. I had to clear my mind. After all this was over, I could go puke if I wanted. I needed to endure it for now.

Still holding her feelers in my mouth, I flew upward, pulling Mother up and away from her guards. Her body rose slightly, but then her tentacle snapped off, and she fell back toward the ground. Quickly, I tossed my head, using the tentacle like a whip to strike Mother. In the end, the force of the attack merely pulled the tentacle from my mouth, but it was such a weird tactic that the

guards hesitated. While they were distracted, I landed a clean hit on Mother's forehead. Her chitin split, and fluids oozed out as she let out a ferocious cry, shaking the earth.

All right, I damaged her! They had me outnumbered, but there was no way I was gonna lose in a battle of fists. Once I figured out how to destroy the guards' formations, I would hit her directly.

I could force my way in and start striking, but her guards' stats were ridiculously high. If I tried to claw her, they'd interrupt. I didn't want them to surround me and give their teeth a chance at me.

I felt a tickly sensation along my back, so I glanced back at Allo. Two new arms grew out of her back, stretching up through the gaps in her clothing to cling onto my body. They were smaller than that third arm she'd had before—and felt way more human, which explained why it was such an uncanny sensation. We made eye contact, and she started to let go of me.

No, don't let go, or you'll fall!

I flew upward to put some distance between us and Mother.

Allo needed to level up more, I knew. I thought about taking her up to the petit-nightmare, but she was the only one who could help with a rank B monster. It would be too difficult for me to keep the guards at bay *and* defeat Mother alone.

And I *really* wanted to defeat Mother. Right now, her guards had a tight formation around her, but that didn't mean it was impossible to pierce their defenses.

I flew close to the ground and let Allo send a series of Gales to blast away the avyssos. She was too weak to defeat them completely, so I pitched in with Windcutter while Partner cast Death. In a flash, we mowed down six avyssos. The experience point notification message ran through my mind over and over again.

Gained 138 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 138 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 79 has become Lv 80.

Good progress. Mother stayed in one place, but I suspected she didn't want to attack and risk breaking up the defense formation. She reached out searchingly with her tentacles, but my Windcutter prevented them from getting too close.

"Gale!" Allo's tornado gusted toward the huddle of avyssos. I was preparing a finishing breath attack when I noticed something odd. Mother's four eyes had started to glow red.

"Eeeeeeghhhh!" Her scream rang out. At the same time, a black light arced out, with Mother at the center. The earth beneath her depressed as if a sink hole was opening up. Then, it began to crack.

I'd seen this skill once before, so I recognized it. Its scope was different then, but *this* was Gravity. Twin Heads had attacked me with it. The avyssos nearby also sank into the earth and froze in place. I felt myself pulled into the Gravity's radius. As the black light covered me, an intense heaviness overtook my body. I tried to resist, but my wings felt like lead. The pressure dragged me down until my feet touched the ground.

It seemed Gravity affected everything around it except for Mother and her babies, who were still and watchful on her back. There was probably nothing to be afraid of if her guards couldn't move. With great effort, I crawled across the ground toward her.

"...Clay!" Allo lay low on my back and used magic. The terrain changed, and a clay spike shot out, piercing through the stomach of a nearby incapacitated avyssos. Its bodily fluids spurted out.

Gained 120 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 120 Experience Points.

"Eeeeeeghhhhhh!" Mother shrieked and whapped a tentacle at me in revenge. I resisted the Gravity enough to shield myself with both my wings. The Tentacle Lash hit my wings, and a sharp pain raced through me. As the feeler bounced off, the black light dissipated, and the heaviness suddenly lifted. My resistance plus the kickback of the Tentacle Lash attack had broken the gravity field!

Ugh... But if I heal up right away...

“Eeeagh! Eeeagh! Eeggghh!” The avyssos were also free, and they wasted no time in leaping toward me as a team. Some bit into my legs and started crawling up onto me. I kicked off the ground and flapped my wings, which several of them were biting.

A throbbing sensation gradually spread through my body. They had injected fluids into me.

Th-this is pretty bad, right?

There were three or four of them attached to one of my legs, three were crawling up my body, and two each clung to both my wings. They weighed so much, I could barely fly.

“Graaar!” My partner cast Death on one of the avyssos biting my wings.

Gained 186 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 186 Experience Points.

As I struggled to rise above the ground, more avyssos jumped onto my body. If I didn’t get ahead of this, there would be no end! The battle was easy while I was airborne and out of reach. Back on the ground, it was tough to fight against so many at once.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaar!” I roared and used the weight of my tail to spin as fast as I could.

“Eeeeeek!” Allo was thrown into the air, but I caught her in my mouth. With her safe, I rolled toward the ground. When I landed, I used Roll to slam directly into the wall, flattening the nearly twenty avyssos clinging to my body. Their shrieking death knells overlapped, making the ground rumble.

Gained 2760 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 2760 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 80 has become Lv 83.

Haa, haa. I got you off of me, you little pests! Serves you right!

I was covered in avyssos fluids, and bits and pieces of them stuck to my back,

but I didn't care in my moment of victory. Once again, I was convinced that Roll reigned supreme.

I pulled my head out from the dent I'd made in the wall. The surrounding avyssos shuffled hesitantly. Rather than tangle with a mad dragon like me, they ran away.

"Eeegghh! Eeeggggghh!"

My Roll skill had scared the daylights out of them. Could it smash through the guards as well? I swiveled around and, without warning, rolled full speed toward Mother. The avyssos in my way were mashed into experience.

"Eeeeeeeeghhhhhhh!" Mother shrieked, and another black light draped heavily over the area. My body and speed were slowed by the move. She'd used Gravity again, but I didn't stop. She whacked at me with her tentacles, but I was undeterred, *relentless*. I charged straight at her.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeghhhhh!" I wondered if Mother was scared of Roll too, because her voice truly sounded like a scream this time.

Go ahead and try to dodge it. If not, that works just as well. My Roll had felled so many monsters. I wouldn't mind adding another one to my list.

"Eeegh! Eeegh! Eegh! Eeegghhh! Eeeegghh!"

A bunch of heavy avyssos and Mother's guards gathered in front of Mother. They squeezed in next to each other, forming a wall. They intended to protect Mother no matter the cost. Sometime in the near future, I would definitely have lasting trauma from seeing this disgusting wall of avyssos, but I suppressed my emotions and kept rolling. I rebounded off the wall but rolled on still, crushing them underneath me, one after the other.

Gained 144 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 144 Experience Points.

Gained 156 Experience Points.

Title Skill "Walking Egg" Lv — activated: gained 156 Experience Points.

The entire experience was one of disgusting sounds and disgusting sensations. About ten notifications popped into my head in rapid succession.

Gained 138 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 138 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 83 became Lv 84.

Even though my level increased several times, I was weirdly neutral on the growth. I had more pressing worries. The avyssos wall was denser than I expected, so I slowed down once I reached the top. My Roll stopped at the absolute worst point possible—this sucked! Four avyssos immediately climbed onto me at once.

“Eeeeeeeeeeeeghhhh!” Mother screamed. Her agile tentacles reached over the wall and struck me on the chest. A direct hit! It dug into my scales and drew blood. The impact hit hard enough that I flew into the air.

I spread my wings against the blast and used the force to stay airborne. As I beat back the avyssos with my wings, I chomped down on Mother’s tentacle. Like holding the string of a kite, it kept me in place. Mother’s huge body staggered.

I had to take advantage of this opportunity to do some damage.

(“We should knock her back and then break away from her.”)

That’s the plan.

A handful of guards still formed a loose physical wall around Mother, but the pieces were crumbling. As they fell apart, they tangled with one another, unable to move quickly anymore. I needed to attack before they repaired their formation.

(“Attack how?”)

Use Soul Addition (Fake Life) to stun them. I don’t like you using that skill, but I don’t like this situation either.

(“You mean bring them back to life? I don’t think that’ll do much good.”)

No, don’t use it on the avyssos. Use it on the dragon god’s bones!

“Graar?!”

Look at Mother’s guards climbing all over it. Just do it, okay? We can’t let this

opportunity slip by.

Partner stayed silent, but she nodded and used Soul Addition (Fake Life) on the dragon god's bones. A black light covered them, imbuing them with energy. They rose from the ground.

"...?" Mother watched this happen with a vacant, uncomprehending stare. Panicking, Mother's guards slid off the bones. A portion of the regular avyssos scattered and fled in bewilderment.

The elite members of Mother's guards realized they needed to stop this new threat and charged toward it. Little did they know, the newly arisen dragon god's skeleton was only level 1. He posed no actual threat to anyone. The bones crumpled in no time, once again laid to rest.

Sorry about reviving you for that. The momentary distraction was enough to weaken the protection around Mother.

I stretched my neck out and opened my mouth wide, revealing Allo inside. She crawled along my tongue, seeking the light. When she saw our terrible circumstances, she trembled for a moment. Bravely, she started to help with magic.

"U-ugh... E-earth magic, Clay!"

Several needles spiked up from the earth. Though they didn't pierce through Mother, they rattled her footing. The guards that had crawled back to her defense lost their balance and flipped onto their backs.

So far, I'd landed a strong attack with Roll, caused panic with the dragon god's revival, and had Allo use Clay. The combination of those three strategies opened up Mother's defenses. This was the time to attack. I yanked on Mother's tentacle and used the force from the recoil to leap toward her. Her tentacle tore from her body with a *pop*, making her shrink back in pain. I put my weight into my front legs and dug my claws into her forehead.

"Eeeeegggghhhhh!" Her head split open wide, scattering disgusting fluids everywhere. The baby avyssos on her back must've sensed the danger because they began to crawl over her body—right at me!

Gross! They can fight too?!

Meanwhile, her guards were getting to their feet. Allo jumped out of my mouth and landed on Mother's body.

"Wind magic! Gale!" Her tornado blew the baby avyssos off of Mother's back.

Nice, Allo! Now I can finish Mother off.

With the babies gone, I could see the grotesque dimples on Mother's body left behind by her precious little parasites. I decided to pretend I never saw something that horrible and focused on the fight at hand. I used my front legs to pin her down.

Partner. On the count of three, we're gonna bite her, okay? As deep as you can!

("Huh? Are you serious?!")

I know she's gross, but if we don't finish her off now, we're gonna have to keep fighting and getting avyssos guts all over us!

Partner closed her eyes. She opened them into narrow slits, squinting at Mother. *("Are you sure there isn't another way?")*

Ready? One, two, three!

Frantically, Partner opened her mouth. I did too. We both sank our fangs into Mother at the same time. My mouth filled with bitter liquid. It felt like the liquid itself wiggled in my mouth. I prayed it was an illusion.

"Eeeeeeghhhhh!"

Thwack, thwack, thump, thwa—thump! Mother's Tentacle Lash battered against my back. I healed using Regenerate, then kicked off the ground with Mother still trapped in our jaws. It was an unsteady climb, but Mother's giant body came with us.

Somewhere along the way, Allo realized she didn't want to get wrapped up in this. She jumped off and left us to our madness. Mother fought back, so I thrashed her over and over again with my front legs like a boxer. My tail staved off her tentacle attacks as I mustered up the strength to fly higher into the sky.

When we were a fair distance above the pit, I used Roll and began spinning. My center of gravity was way off, so it was unsteady, but I somehow increased

the speed. Partner and I worked in perfect harmony. We both opened our mouths to let Mother go. As she plummeted toward the ground, I lashed her with my tail. A thunderous crack rang out as her giant body fell.

Normal Skill “Celestial Fall” Lv 3 has become Lv 4.

I stretched my wings out behind me and dove after Mother. On the way down, I kicked off the wall to increase my speed, landing on her body with my claws piercing into her at the moment she hit the ground. The ground rumbled with our tremendous impact. A huge fissure formed underneath her. Mother couldn't withstand this devastating attack. A waterfall of fluids gushed out of her mouth.

Normal Skill “Earth Fall” Lv 1 has become Lv 2.

But Mother's giant body twitched on. It should have been over. The combo of Celestial Fall and Earth Fall was too strong. Although, I still wasn't grateful to that hero one bit.

“Eegh...” she cried out quietly, weakly moving her legs. The remaining avyssos clamored over to her at once. They ignored me, too stunned at the defeat of their boss.

“Eeeeeeeeghhhhh!” Mother gnashed her fangs toward an approaching avyssos, one that drew close to her face. It tried to avoid her attack, but she was too fast for it. The avyssos was no match for her deadly fangs. In no time at all, Mother ate three of her own protectors, leaving behind only some legs and splattered body fluids.

G-gross...

I guess she did have that skill, Food Regeneration, like Ballrabbit. If you ate something, you could heal yourself.

Mother pushed the remains aside and tried to attack another. I pressed down with my front legs, incapacitating her. Her fangs just barely scratched another avyssos. I couldn't let her move even a few inches, or she'd eat something to regenerate HP. Luckily, the other avyssos scampered away, favoring survival over a gruesome sacrifice.

“Eeeghhh! Eeeghh!” Mother was stubborn and tried to reach out for any

avysos she could reach with her tentacles. I finally stomped on the source of her tentacles, her head. Her tentacles and legs spasmed. Then, she stopped moving altogether.

Gained 3240 Experience Points.

Title Skill “Walking Egg” Lv — activated: gained 3240 Experience Points.

Ouroboros Lv 84 has become Lv 87.

Whoa, that was a lot of experience!

Title Skill “Hero” Lv 5 has become Lv 6.

Huh? Hero leveled up too? In that case, more skills were incoming.

Gained Normal Skill “Holy” Lv 1.

Finally! I got it! The skill that could lift curses! Now, I didn’t have to worry about Dragon Scale Powder anymore!

I wanna try it out! Holy! Holy!

Hm? It wasn’t working...

“*Graar.*” Partner growled, and a solemn ball of light appeared at the tip of her nose. It quickly lost its shape and gently scattered off. The little drops of light faded as they spread out. It was a beautiful light.

Ooh! Amazing! So that’s Holy, huh? But, uh... Once again you got one of my skills, Partner, but I guess I don’t mind anymore.

Allo walked over to me. I wanted to see how much she had leveled. While I’d mostly defeated Mother on my own, she *did* help.

Name: Allo

Species: Levana Low Lich

Status: Cursed

Level: 24/65

HP: 116/252

Wow, she jumped twenty-three levels! She did defeat *a lot* of avyssos. I looked back over at Mother's body, then the dragon god's bones. Allo raised her hand toward the skeleton.

"Clay." Earth rose to cover the dragon god's bones. Allo bowed her head and closed her eyes as if praying over the buried dragon god. I did the same.

With Mother dead, the overbreeding problem with the avyssos would end for good. And I...really wanted to take a bath.

I lifted my head to see a tiny green thing peering over the edge of the cliff. I squinted and realized it was ten of those forest sprites. They pointed toward Lithovar Village and then disappeared into the air.

Interlude:

The Noble's Tyranny Act 2

Tolemann

I SAT DOWN ON A STUMP in the middle of camp. Although there was a piece of thick cloth draped over the stump, it was a far cry from the comfort of the chairs back home in my mansion. The food was also terrible when compared to the food back home. How long would I be forced to live like this? I hid a yawn with my hand.

I longed to experience the rush of battle. The whole world needed to see how gifted I was with a sword. Everyone would respect me once I killed those filthy barbarians and came home with the mythical beast in hand. They'd be so impressed, I'd become the king of Ardesia.

Impatiently, I started wiggling my toes. No, no—I couldn't be childish. Not as a noble, and not as the future king. That was when I realized something was amiss with my soldiers. They were whispering to each other about something. I even heard snickers here and there. I wondered what was happening, until Azalea, the commander of the first unit of the Hungry Hunters and my personal bodyguard, came over to me. He was a very considerate person to notice something was amiss and immediately notify me of it. Everyone else could learn from his example.

"Your Excellency, Derek from the Sixty-Eighth Regiment has returned." I frowned, and Azalea continued, "He was one of the soldiers sent to scout out the Lithovar Village. He went missing after he was attacked by a monster."

"Oh, I see. Very well."

Hm, so that's what it was? I seemed to remember some idiot had gotten himself killed by a monster on a scouting trip. Evidently, he'd survived. Not that I cared.

“However, he’s saying something unusual. He said that members of his regiment were cruel to him and used him as bait. He might be seeking some kind of punishment for them.”

“Huh? Don’t be ridiculous. It’s only natural to send out the soldier lowest on the totem pole as bait.”

“True. I’ll go have a talk with him, so he doesn’t upset you any further, Your Excellency.”

I couldn’t remember exactly who this Derek fellow was, but he was probably a rookie. The Hungry Hunters’ motto stated, “The strong have a right to torment the weak.” It was his own fault if he allowed himself to be used for bait.

They had modeled their motto after my own. Naturally, the strong should rule over the weak. After all, I was the strongest in the world, so it followed that I should become king.

“Yes, do that,” I said. “If there’s a whining dog placed in front of me, my sword might accidentally slip, after all.” Azalea smiled faintly, but his expression changed once he heard someone yelling.

“I want to talk to Lord Tolemann! Where is Lord Tolemann?!” I recognized the screaming man. He held an unfamiliar spear in his hand, though he wore a Hungry Hunters uniform. So, this was Derek.

“Forgive me. I acted too late, and now you’ve seen this disgraceful sight. I’ll deal with the dog immediately.” Azalea hurried over to Derek. “Hmph. If you have a problem with someone in your unit, talk to them directly. Don’t bother Lord Tolemann about it.”

But Derek ignored Azalea and looked at me, yelling, “Lord Tolemann! I want you to call off your plans immediately! The Lithovar Tribe are not barbarians, as the rest of the world would have you think! When a monster attacked and injured me, they saved me! They’re not filthy barbarians at all!”

“Bwah?” I blurted out.

Azalea grabbed Derek by the shoulders. “How dare you speak that way to Lord Tolemann?! How about I knock in your stupid head, huh?”

“Wait, Azalea. You’re Derek, then? You’ve said some interesting things. Bring him closer.”

Azalea kept his grip on Derek’s shoulders and violently dragged him over to me. Derek stood in front of me and tried to push off Azalea with his free hand, fruitlessly. Instead, Azalea waited a few moments and then slowly let him go. Derek glared at him before returning his gaze to me.

“Lord Tolemann, as I said before, please call off your plans to massacre the Lithovar Tribe.”

“Hrm, hrm. Why do you suggest that?”

Derek frowned. “Like I said, because they saved me.”

“Hrm, hrm. And?”

“They’re not the dangerous barbarians that people living near the forest say they are.”

“Hrm, hrm.” I nodded. Derek let out a relieved sigh. “So?”

“Huh?”

“There’s more to your story, isn’t there? Hurry it up, then.”

“N-no, I...” Derek trailed off.

I snorted with laughter. “Hrm, I see. Let’s consider this for a moment. Suppose the Lithovars really *are* a peaceful tribe, populated by people who love nature and live among it quietly.”

Derek stood silently.

“What does that have to do with me?” I asked.

The color drained from Derek’s face, and his mouth moved silently. “A-are you serious?”

“Are *you* serious? Do you have any idea how much money I spent on this journey in my quest to become king? Do you have any idea how hard it was to get permission for my soldiers to come here? Your mind cannot seem to grasp such simple concepts, so I’m sure you have no idea. If I call off butchering the Lithovar Tribe, my glory will slip through my hands, and all the money I spent

will have been for naught! Everyone will laugh at me, saying Tolemann was afraid of the barbarians, and that's why he called off his plan!"

Honestly, what an unthinking imbecile. Not only was he stupid, but he was illogical and useless. I despised people like him. What I hated most of all was that he went out of his way to cause trouble for *me*.

"A fight with the Lithovars is unavoidable, since I'll have to tear this forest apart looking for the Carbuncle. It doesn't matter to me if the tribe is good or bad!" I brandished my sword, still sheathed, and whacked the ground next to Derek with it.

Derek said nothing.

"Now I'm upset. This is why I hate fools like you! Azalea, remove this idiot from my sight!"

"Yes, Your Excellency!" Azalea grabbed Derek by the shoulder and escorted him away.

"I heard you were violent and bad-tempered, but I had no idea you were *this* corrupt! You're the filthy barbarian, Tolemann! I'll never follow you! I quit! I'm leaving you—and the worst soldiers ever!" Derek tore off his uniform jacket and threw it down upon the ground, glaring at me. Then, his strange spear in hand, he tried to leave.

What did he say? He dared to call me, a nobleman, violent and bad-tempered? A filthy barbarian?! I was so angry I couldn't speak, until I remembered he'd received nothing but a worthless commoner's education. His words were no more sensible than a barking dog's. I quickly calmed myself.

Derek moved toward the deep forest. Certainly, he wouldn't return to the Lithovar Tribe to warn them? How stupid could he be?

"Derek, you cursed cur! Do you have any idea what you're doing?" I shouted.

"Do you have any idea what *you're* about to do?" he retorted.

"Apparently, you don't understand. All I'd have to do is give the order and every member of your family will have their throats slit."

"What?!" Derek was the speechless one now.

“But I’m a merciful man. You dare to take the side of the barbarians and foolishly betray me? You’re shameless, but I shall give you a choice. If you go straight home, I won’t harm you. If you arrive home and take your family out of my domain, I won’t chase after you. But if you refuse to do that...”

Derek stared back into the forest in stunned silence. He closed his eyes and then, swallowing with regret, dropped the spear. He ran in the opposite direction of the forest. I glared after him, but then looked away and yawned. I had no intention of going out of my way to capture him. After all, I promised him if he went straight home and left with his family that I wouldn’t do a thing.

“Hey, Azalea.”

“Yes!” Azalea immediately responded, stretching a hand out toward Derek’s retreating back. “Fire Magic! Flare!” Red flames filled the area, so bright I had to squint my eyes. A single red beam shot from Azalea’s hand, reaching out in search of its target.

Derek collapsed to the ground without so much as a scream. Everything from his knees down was burnt to a crisp, sending ashes into the air. The beam left a huge hole straight through his back.

“You’re a cruel man, Azalea,” I snickered. Azalea knelt down before me.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t bear how rude he was, and so I attacked him. I shall accept any punishment you have for me.”

Of course, he knew that when I called his name, I was ordering him to cast that magic.

“I said I wouldn’t do anything. However, I never said that my bodyguard wouldn’t burn him to a crisp. Ha ha ha, it’s so troublesome to have such a loyal subordinate, don’t you think?”

“Your Excellency, you said that if Derek didn’t go straight home and gather up his family, you would punish them. What shall we do about them?”

“Hrm? Well, I’m a man of my word. Unlike you, a disobedient servant boy!” I joked, and everyone around us laughed.

Just then, a group of eight men returned to camp. The one leading them was

the captain of my Twenty-First Regiment, Glaudel. He had red hair and a large scar that ran down his forehead and across his eye.

“Lord Tolemann, I’ve finished setting up those magic barriers! They should start to work soon.”

“Well done, Glaudel!” Everything was going according to plan. I could launch my attack at any time.

“I had to kill three people who saw me, so as to leave no witnesses. I’m sure their bodies have been found. They might suspect something.”

“Well, there’s nothing to be done about that. I don’t want them to be too prepared for battle, but I wanted to make sure the barrier was in full effect first. It’s no matter. We shall attack before sunrise tomorrow morning. My beloved sword is aching to run through those filthy barbarians!”

“Yes! That’s our Lord Tolemann! We’ll kill every last one of them!”

Ha ha. It was time to call everyone over and confirm the details of our plans. After all this time, I would get to kill again.

Bonus Story:
Reincarnated as an Avyssos Hatchling
I'll Become the Creepiest!

Part 1

WHEN I WOKE UP, the only thing I could see was a yellow, gooey membrane. I sensed a sparkling blue sky beyond it. The yellow membrane separated me from the view, but I was sure I would see that sky with my own eyes before long.

What had happened to me, though? Where was I? I wanted to look around, but I couldn't move my neck freely. Nor my arms and legs...which were really short.

Huh? Wait, I had *a lot* of legs!

I managed to struggle enough to escape the yellow membrane. I was abnormally hungry. As I looked down at my arms and legs, I saw fine yellow hairs growing on them. Beneath me lay some kind of giant corpse.

Bugs like bright red flies clustered all over the creature's body. I'd never seen bugs like them before. It must've been some time since the beast died.

Instinctively, I hunched over and sank my fangs into the furry skin of the corpse under me. I smelled animal blood, but a horrible, rotten stench was mixed in. Even though it smelled terrible, for some reason it didn't stop my ravenous appetite. Actually, if you could believe it, the smell only made me hungrier.

I bent my legs and held fast to the lump of flesh below me. For a while, I lost myself in the feast. Murky, dark fluids seeped out from the rotten flesh, but I didn't care. I just ate and ate, and ate some more. The more I ate, the happier and more satisfied I became. My entire mind was focused on eating the foul meat. I didn't care how much of that putrid, bloody fluid got on me at all.

After I'd eaten quite a bit, my stomach swelled, and I felt much calmer.

Wait... I have fangs? And is it just me, or is my body not human anymore?

Yeah, there's no way I'm human.

Once I realized that, everything came together quickly. If I wasn't human, I

was something else. That was ridiculous, but there was no other way to explain it. I had reincarnated as some kind of creature.

Catching a movement in my periphery, I quickly turned toward it. I saw a huge, gross bug in the yellowish gooey membrane thing. It had a light orange head with two black dots on it. Eight long and spindly legs stretched out from its chartreuse body. I tried raising my hand to it—and the weird bug lifted one of its own front legs.

“Eeeeegh?!” I attempted to scream, but instead I emitted an unearthly sound. No animal I knew made that kind of noise.

Y-you’ve gotta be kidding me. I’m...I’m that thing?!

I remembered I was a human in my past life, but nothing beyond that. What in the world did I do in my past life to deserve this?! My bad karma must have been off the charts. Stunned and reeling, I tried not to take in the face reflected in the gooey membrane.

Suddenly, something that reminded me of a video game screen popped into my head.

Species: Baby Avyssos

Status: Normal

Lv: 1/23

HP: 14/14

MP: 6/6

B-baby avyssos? What the heck is that? Is that what I am?

Baby Avyssos: Rank D–.

A newly born avyssos. It may look grotesque, but it’s much less dangerous than its evolved form, so it is best to get rid of them when they’re still young. Engages in cannibalism even more than its mature counterparts and can eat a very large amount when hungry.

Evolved form? I'm gonna evolve? And then I'll become even grosser?! That's not something to strive for!

Just calm down. Calm down. I need to take a minute and collect my thoughts. This whole thing is just too weird. It has to be a dream. If I pinch my cheeks, I'll wake up. Ahh, I can't reach my face with my front legs. Dammit! This is so frustrating!

Also, where is my cheek?!

Confused, I stretched out my front legs and wriggled around. As I was doing that, a creepy bug emerged from the nearby egg sac and crawled toward me. I remembered the word “cannibalism” on that window screen.

I-Is it gonna eat me?! Dying just five minutes after reincarnation is too cruel! I turned my back and started to run. My legs were different lengths, so it was slow going. Who the heck designed this body, anyway?

I jumped down from the brown creature's corpse. Everything on the ground resembled the world I remembered from what I could see stretched out in front of me. Lots of trees. Apparently, I was in a forest. I glanced behind me and made eye contact with the brown monster's corpse. It was dead, but its vacant eyes seemed to glare at me. A large horn protruded from its head.

I'd hatched from an egg laid on top of a giant dead cow. Now that I could see the whole scene—yeah, it was pretty gross.

Anyway, I needed to get out of here! There was no way I was gonna die amidst this disgusting tableau! I ran away as fast as I could.

Once I calmed down, I slowed.

Haa, haa...

Since I ran this far, those other baby avyssos wouldn't chase after me, right? My legs were so tired. I couldn't walk another step. Too weak and hungry from my escape, I sat down on the ground. That was when I noticed some kind of shadowy figure staring at me from between the trees. It was much larger than a baby avyssos. Its body was dark crimson, and a long tongue dangled from its mouth.

Lucky for me, it was a giant spider!

Species: Taranturouge

Status: Normal

Lv: 19/30

HP: 84/84

MP: 69/69

This thing was clearly stronger than I was, so I tried to run away. Unfortunately, it quickly spat silk that tangled around my body. I struggled against it, but I was too weak to break free. I was done for, finished. The spider's maroon tongue stretched out toward me.

Please, at least eat me in one bite, I prayed as my body trembled.

"Eeeeeeghh!"

"Eeegghhh!"

The two sudden screams came from elsewhere. I turned and saw two of the orange-headed bugs—the baby avyssos—had followed me. No way I would mistake those creepy things. They stood next to each other and screeched at the giant spider, trying to intimidate it.

What are they doing? They're not really trying to eat me? Even though I ran away in fear? Now they're risking their lives to save mine? I felt my eyes get hot as I grappled with the guilt.

Then, I snapped back to reality. That red spider was stronger than the three of us combined. It was probably happy to find two extra snacks to go along with its meal. This didn't change a thing for me.

I-Idiots! Forget about me! Run away!

I struggled in vain. The red spider turned toward the two screeching baby avyssos and shot long threads toward them, ensnaring them both. It left me and slowly walked over to them.

“Eeeeeeghh! Eeeeghh!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. *Hey! Long-tongue spider! If you’re gonna eat someone, eat me! What, are you scared of me? Huh?*

Perhaps my insults somehow got through to it, because the spider pivoted around to face me. The baby avyssos screamed even more frantically as though trying to get its attention, but the spider had chosen its target. Ponderously, it stalked back to me.

Come on! Bring it on!

Even if my chances of winning were slim at best, I was going to bite it as hard as I could. I gnashed my fangs together. I didn’t care whether I lived or died, but those baby avyssos had tried to protect me. I didn’t want them to get hurt. If it was the last thing I did, I would gnaw this spider to death!

“Eeeeeeeeeeghhhhhh!” A loud scream interrupted my train of thought.

Another huge bug appeared, and this one was about twice the size of the red spider. It was also ridiculously fast. Even though its long legs varied in size like mine, it moved dexterously. It resembled us babies but had a black body, and it was somehow much creepier than us. It had to be an adult avyssos.

Looking at it was so dreadful, I almost wanted to die.

I’m going to turn into that when I grow up? Isn’t that a little too cruel? Take it easy on me, won’t ya?!

That this monster might save me never crossed my mind—I was too busy regretting whatever I did in my past life to deserve such punishment. Paying no attention to my suffering, the red spider sized up the adult avyssos. It made the executive decision to run away, but it was flipped onto its back before it could escape. The adult avyssos bit into its head, killing it instantly.

Whoa, the big avyssos is super strong... But, man, is it ever disgusting!

“Eegh!”

“Eeeegh!”

“Eeeeghh!”

Thanks to the adult avyssos, we babies were freed from the spider webs. We cheered by moving our long, spindly legs. In that moment, the others didn’t

seem so unsettling anymore.

Part 2

I DUG MY FRONT LEGS into the ground. Today marked thirty days since I reincarnated as a baby avyssos. Once I adjusted to life as a bug, it was unexpectedly pleasant. The two baby avyssos who helped me on my first day in this new life were my big brother Avyo and little sister Avyko. We played together while we waited for the adult avyssos who saved us to bring our food. Apparently, she was our mom.

“Eegh?” (*“What’s wrong. Brother?”*) Avyko walked over and looked quizzically at the counting mark I’d made in the dirt.

I distracted her by acting like I saw something in the distance, and she fell for it. I dashed off, and she scampered after me. She was cute like that.

In the past month, I’d discovered that, despite whatever sins I committed in my past life, I was a special creature here. I still received those strange messages whenever I came across another monster, and only I could see those. The stats showed levels, stamina, HP, attack power, and various skills. With such a wealth of information, I could avoid monsters that were too strong for me. If it was something I *could* take on, I could predict how the monster would attack me and throw together an attack plan. My mom was impressed whenever I used the information to help my siblings escape from dangerous monsters.

The other thing I learned about skills was that you could gain a variety of them if you worked hard enough. Admittedly, the Special Skills available to a baby avyssos were limited, but I liked to sneak away from my mom and practice them with my siblings. Between the three of us, we had Telepathy, a mind-reading skill; Rest, a recovery spell; and Psychic Sense, which warned for the presence of monsters nearby. No other avyssos I’d met had those three skills in their arsenal. They resulted from our hard work.

Rest and Psychic Sense were extremely handy. We’d managed to level up well thanks to those skills. At that moment, I was level 12, Avyo was level 9, and

Avyko was level 8. The other baby avyssos we knew were only about level 3.

With the Telepathy skill, I could sense some of what other monsters thought. I gathered plenty with that ability, including some things close to home. I found out that Daddy Avyssos had fought a graffant so our mother could lay eggs in its body, but he'd died during the battle. Our mother now raised us single-handedly, or many-leggedly, you could say.

It was a sad story. I pressed my front legs together and offered up a prayer for my late father. *Dad, I promise I'll become a great avyssos.*

Avyo, Avyko, and I liked to sneak out of the nest and explore in secret. We managed to surround our old foe, the tarantourouge, and kill it. It was low level, so I expected we would win easily, but it was a tough fight. Ultimately, we won because the spider was too stubborn to flee. It was much faster than us and could've easily gotten away. Its pride made it fall to a group of baby avyssos hatchlings.

We were ecstatic, until an adult avyssos appeared from the forest. It wasn't Mom, and it wasn't our uncle who often came to play with us. I used Telepathy and felt the hostility drip from the avyssos.

("He he. He he. Looks yummy. Give it. Looks yummy. He he.") Saliva dripped down from the avyssos's mouth.

I was torn. This wasn't the tarantourouge we tackled together. But...but...

We were still too weak to beat an adult avyssos. This one was even higher level than Mom.

I know this sucks, but we have to run away, Avyo.

("No! This is the. Fruits of our. Hard work and. Bond! I won't let. That thing. Have it!")

Listen, Avyo, I understand where you're coming from, but it's no use! We're kids. It's impossible. Even if our stats were higher than his, we couldn't do it. We can't disobey an adult, and his stats are so high. There's not even a chance of victory with his high agility and attack power.

("Hah! Fine, then! I'll leave you. In the dust!") Before I could stop him, Avyo

leapt toward the adult avyssos.

H-hey! You can't! I wanted to chase after him, but I hesitated. My stats were higher than Avyo's, but that avyssos would wreck me if I attacked it. I knew exactly how strong it was. Yet, when we were first born, Avyo didn't hesitate to come to my rescue.

I raced out to save him, but it was too late. The avyssos moved swiftly and bit Avyo in half. His body tumbled to the ground, his legs twitching weakly.

Avy...o? H-hang in there, Avyo! I'll cast Rest on you! Okay?! I stepped toward him, but then I heard his thoughts.

("I'm...sorry. I messed. Up. Should have. Listened to you. Like always. You're so. Strong and you. Always know. Everything. But I was. Jealous. Of you. So I went. Against you when. You gave. Up.")

Avyo, stop talking like you're gonna die! It'll be okay! There's a skill in this world to regenerate body parts! I'll work really hard and learn the skill! Okay? Okay?!

("Take Avyko and. Run away. I'm done. For. You're smart so. You know that. Right?")

Hearing that, I faced the truth. I couldn't save Avyo. He was right. The only thing I could do was take Avyko and run away. I found her in shock, unable to move, so I put her on my back and fled.

That avyssos was abnormal. It treated us like enemies from the start. Avyko will be in danger if we don't get away. This is all we can do.

"Eegh?" ("Y-you're going to. Leave behind. Avyo?") she asked in a trembling squeak. I ignored her and raced through the forest. Once we were back to the nest, Mom and our uncle would be there. If we worked together, we could defeat that avyssos.

("He he. He. He he he.")

We left behind the horrible sounds of my best friend and older brother, Avyo, being eaten.

I thought returning to the nest would solve our problems, but I was wrong. It

was hell. There was an adult avyssos I didn't recognize perched on the graffant carcass, our nest. Half-eaten heavy avyssos bodies lay scattered around, lifeless. My brothers and sisters, and my mother and uncle next to them.

Using our Stealth skill, Avyko and I concealed ourselves. We watched from the trees, completely dumbfounded. We were lucky to have Psychic Sense, so we could hide from oncoming threats. But we couldn't do anything except watch the horrific scene unfold. Avyko's Telepathy stayed silent, and I didn't have the presence of mind to speak either.

Emptiness and anger overwhelmed me. I wanted to jump out there and just end it all. My beloved avyssos nest was gone. I chanced casting my eyes toward mom's body and saw her front leg weakly sway. She was still alive! Another avyssos noticed and mercilessly descended upon her, devouring her for good.

Avyko took a step forward before I could. That drew me out of my fugue. She pushed me away from the nest, into the forest.

("I can't. Take it. I can't. Do this. Anymore. I hate. It.") she said after a long silence.

Avyko... Let's get revenge. Let's decimate their nest.

("There's no. Way we can. Do that.")

Yes, we can! Because I can see monster statuses. We'll grow strong enough to destroy them and get our revenge.

Later, we saw the group of avyssos that attacked our nest wandering the forest. I used Telepathy to tap into their thoughts and found out they had come from a huge nest far away. Recently, a new boss had appeared and demanded they expand their territory. They set out with orders to devour any avyssos clans they came across along the way.

Rage burned in my veins. I would destroy their home, just like they destroyed mine. In the end, I would eat their boss for dinner.

Part 3

SEVEN YEARS HAD PASSED since then. The time it took to reach that point seemed vast.

After Avyko and I escaped together, we made a peaceful and happy nest, far away. I used my View Status skill to efficiently level us up and learn new skills.

I started out as a baby avyssos with a D– rank, evolved into a rank C avyssos, a rank B– avyssos knight next, and finally a rank A– avyssos brave. I stood about the same size as a graffant, but my stats were certainly higher. I’d acquired a myriad of hard-hitting skills since my last evolution. My body developed a golden color. When I checked my description, it said, “An avyssos who wishes to be a true hero.”

To tell you the truth, when I evolved into an avyssos knight, a Title Skill named Final Evolution popped up on my status, so I thought I’d hit my limit. I was bummed about it, until I encountered a blond swordsman who would *not* stop chasing me through the forest. I lured him back to our nest and worked together with our kids to kill him.

With his death, something called a Sacred Skill—Human Realm Path—appeared in place of the Final Evolution skill. The status stated that I could evolve into an avyssos brave. In my eyes, it was a lifeline sent straight from heaven.

“Should we go?”

Next to me sat a beautiful woman with black hair. Her voice was sad. Once I evolved, I learned Human Transformation; this was Avyko in her human form. We used the skill to form an alliance with a group of humans called the Lithovar Tribe who lived nearby.

Along the way, Avyko had evolved from a rank D– baby avyssos to a rank C avyssos to a rank B– avyssos priest.

Yeah, let’s go, Avyko. We trained for this day.

We would not involve our children. Their stats weren't high enough, so they wouldn't be much help. Not where we were going.

The enemy avyssos boss, our archnemesis, was a rank B+ avyssos called Mother. Her ability allowed her to pump out hordes of babies, way more than we ever did during breeding seasons. We also restrained ourselves in accordance with our alliance with the Lithovar Tribe. For the sake of peace, we agreed not to expand our nest outside of our defined nesting area.

The boss seemed so strong, all those years ago, because I thought my final evolution would be rank B—. After tireless research into avyssos evolution, I discovered the only way an avyssos could evolve into a Mother was if she was both a female and raised by a Mother herself. As we could not meet those conditions, I thought we had no chance of winning.

It was a complete miracle that I evolved into a rank A— avyssos brave, thanks to that tenacious blond swordsman. If I hadn't acquired that mysterious skill and evolved, there wouldn't be a way for us to beat Mother.

Thanks, blond-haired guy named Illusia. Your death won't be in vain.

Avyko transformed back into an avyssos, and the two of us crawled down into Mother's nest.

Just you wait. We'll wipe out every last avyssos in this nest.

We were immediately attacked by avyssos, heavy avyssos, and Mother's guards, but we wiped the floor with them. The furious Mother revealed herself by breaking through the wall. Her body was covered in too many undulating tentacles to count, and her head was topped by four ominous eyes.

Avyko and I trembled at the sight of her giant grotesque body. Fear? No, we trembled with excitement. We'd waited seven years for our vengeance.

Mom, Uncle...Avyo, all our siblings...! Sorry we took so long to reach this point.

My mind turned to our relatives who were massacred that day. Well, my siblings appeared identical, so I couldn't tell them apart, but still! They say it's the thought that counts.

"Eeeeghhhhhhhhhh!" Mother let out a vicious scream.

“Eeeeeeeeghhh!”

“Eeeeeegghh!”

Avyko and I screamed with equal ferocity and knocked the small fry out of the way as we charged for her.

Part 4

THE FRIGHTFUL BATTLE lasted for almost a whole day. After a long struggle, we were finally near the end. Mother's Food Regeneration skill allowed her to consume the bodies of her comrades to heal herself, so she put up an extended fight. However, she eventually ran out of MP. I increased the aggression of my attacks and succeeded at last. She toppled.

Mother had struggled until the end, but I had defeated her. It was a close one. I probably should've leveled more before taking her on, but we still had our revenge.

One more thing: We didn't destroy Mother's nest. After the battle with Mother, we found baby avyssos eggs attached to a nearby monster carcass. As we approached them, another avyssos desperately attacked us. Even though it saw me defeat Mother and knew I was too strong to beat, it protected the eggs. My mother did the same thing once. I felt a pain in my chest. Avyko reached out and gently touched my front leg, which was stretched toward the smaller avyssos.

("Let's. Go home?")

I hung my head. The two of us silently left Mother's nest and returned to our own.

Once we were home, our children gathered around us with excitement and anger. They wanted to know why we had left them alone to attack another nest.

Sorry, but we prepared for this for a long time. Forgive your dad's selfishness. I gently patted my children on the head. They bit me. Ha ha ha! I guess they really were angry.

"Graaaaar! Graaaaar!"

Jeez, what's with all that racket?

What was it, anyway? A dragon? I'd turn that measly dragon into ashes. After

all, I was the avyssos brave, hero of the avyssos! I raised my front leg and fired a Brave Wave at the dragon. This was a Special Skill that only avyssos braves learned. I felt the dragon back off. I won!

Abruptly, a searing pain shot through my head...and I woke up.

I was inside the dragon god's shrine. My partner glared at me. An angry red line ran across her face—as if I hit her with Windcutter.

“Graaaaar!” (“What the hell do you think you’re doing, attacking me in your sleep?!”)

I'd never seen her so angry. What just happened? Where was my beautiful Avyko? Sharp fangs dug into my head again. It *really* hurt.

I waved my front legs around, frantically searching for my beloved wife and our brood. I touched something on top of my head. It was an avyssos. Thank goodness!

(“It’s not good at all! Snap out of it! Put it down! Put it down! It’s disgusting!”)

I stared blankly at Partner. Then, I noticed Allo watching me with an anxious expression.

“D-Dragon God?” she asked hesitantly.

Once I processed who she was, I fully returned to wakefulness.

Wait, that was a dream, all of it?! My beautiful Avyko was a figment of my imagination?!

I tossed away the avyssos I held. I'd spent so much time fighting avyssos during my battle with Mother that I was dreaming about them. This avyssos was probably one of Mother's grandchildren.

(“Hurry up and kill it with the Wind thing! If you let it go, it’ll make more babies!”) I focused my magical energy into my wings and readied Windcutter. Somehow, I couldn't do it. My mind's eye was full of the memory of my lovely Avyko, gently stopping me from killing that avyssos after the long battle with Mother. I lowered my wings. My partner glared at me.

Partner, even avyssos are living creatures with their own lives and their own families! They’re just trying to survive!

(“Are you still half-asleep, you idiot?!”) She bonked me again.

Bonus Story:

Life as a Two-Headed Dragon

Sleeping Edition

LATE AT NIGHT, I woke up to a tremendous ache in my head.

What in the world? I wondered. Once I opened my eyes, I found the source of it. My partner was looking at me drowsily.

"Graar." (*"Sorry. I was half-asleep,"*) she said in a message to me.

Oof, she sure had a hard head. I guess I did too.

It must've hurt you when you got me as well. What a mishap.

"Graar," she said. A warm little ball of light appeared on the tip of her nose. It traveled to my forehead, and the pain eased. She'd used Hi-Rest on me.

Hey, thanks. Regenerate would've healed it by itself, though.

"Graar," she said again. This time she healed her own forehead. Even though we were both in pain, she healed me first. I was surprised.

You've grown very considerate, Partner!

(*"What's that supposed to mean?"*) She bonked my head, lightly this time.

Well, you always put food first, but lately you've started caring about Allo and

(*"You really hold a grudge, don't you?"*)

Sorry, sorry! I meant it as a joke, but it turned out harsher than I expected. I didn't mean to be so serious. Forget I ever said anything.

She lay her head down and closed her eyes, but she curled her neck farther away from me than usual. Was she trying not to hit me again? I chuckled wryly.

You don't need to be so polite. We share the same body.

She opened one eyelid to stare at me.

("Sorry for being too formal.")

Wow, you're so earnest today, and reserved! It's throwing me off. Did you eat something spoiled? I'm sorry you had to grow on such an evil body. I hope I won't grow three heads with my next evolution. Two is enough. Don't think I could handle any more commotion.

("What if your only evolution options are one-headed dragons?")

If that's the case, I won't evolve. Don't worry. It'd be too quiet if I got rid of you.

Exhaustion returned, and I felt a yawn coming on. I turned away to do so. I didn't want to accidentally spit on her; I also didn't want to get yelled at. The other day, I accidentally spit on her and caused a spat. I had to be careful.

Silence passed between us for a while, but then she sent another message. *("What if a really strong monster appears that you can't defeat unless you evolve?")*

Huh? What's up with you today? You're more talkative than usual. Aren't you sleepy?

I thought she was joking, but when I turned toward her, she moved her face close to mine. Surprised, I drew my head back. Her face was cute when she was gazed at me with puppy-dog eyes like that. Although, if I were a human, I'd probably froth at the mouth with fear instead.

I realized how serious she was as I took in her expression. I cracked my neck and moved close to her again.

If I wound up in a situation where abandoning you was my only option, it still wouldn't be the answer. I'd do everything I could to find another way. If I couldn't find one, I'd hang on until the end. If that didn't work, then that would be it. I don't know the exact scenario you're imagining, but both of us might die. Call me an idiot, but I don't care. Anyway, why are you worried about this? It's not like you.

She watched me quietly but didn't respond. I felt a little embarrassed by her intense stare, so I put my head down.

That's enough. Let's go to sleep. Okay?

("Partner... I know you used to dislike me and think about cutting off my head.")

"Raargh!" I choked a bit from how startled I was.

Listen, Partner. Back then, I didn't know you, and I was panicked about the Nina situation. It crossed my mind briefly, but I swear I don't think that anymore! Honestly! I'm sorry. It was wrong of me. No wonder you kept thrashing around, and you even remember it...

I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. What do you wanna eat tomorrow? Partner? Are you mad? I asked nervously.

My partner remained solemn—then she burst out laughing.

("I know that, silly! I was only teasing!")

Ph-phew...

("But I wanna eat a graffant tomorrow.")

Okay, jeez, I got it. Leave it to me, Partner.

She smiled, closed her eyes, and went to sleep. I wondered why she brought up the past now. I supposed, if she could pick up on my thoughts back then, she remembered it enough to dwell on it.

Don't worry, Partner. No matter what happens, I won't sacrifice you.

I watched her sleep for a while. The faint glow of the moonlight shone gently on her cheeks. Her scales glistened a pale blue-white, lending her an otherworldly kind of beauty. I was entranced for some time, before I snapped out of it.

What am I thinking? She was still my rash, messy, gluttonous partner, same as always. Drowsiness hit me again, so I set my head on the floor and closed my eyes.

See you tomorrow, Partner. Sweet dreams.

As I was about to fall asleep again, I felt something touch my face. My partner had slid her head under my neck and nuzzled against me in her sleep.

“Graar...gaaa.”

Luckily, it didn't hurt. I didn't want to pry her off and wake her.

“Gaa.” She made a quiet noise and rubbed against my cheek.

H-hey, quit it! You're embarrassing me!

I turned my neck away from her, but she and her nuzzling snout followed.

Ugh, this position is super uncomfortable! Should I wake her up? I can wake her up now, right?!

“Graar...garr...graar...” (“...counting on...you...Partner...”)

When I looked at her happy face, I stopped minding the discomfort. Was she dreaming about eating the graffant? Sounded like I was in her dream too. When I thought about it, it'd be hard for me not to be in her dreams. We had shared a body since she was born. I was all she knew.

I gave up on waking her and found a more comfortable position. I let her nuzzle against me and returned to sleep. Once I got used to it, the cool feeling of her scales felt pretty nice. Sometimes the tip of her nose tickled me, but that wasn't a huge deal.

Before I could doze off, I noticed that Allo was gone. Lately, the treant and the spiders had slept outside, but Allo still slept in the back of the shrine.

I glanced around for Allo and saw her next to the petit-nightmare, near the entrance. They both glared at me. Actually, the petit-nightmare glared at me. For some reason, Allo glared at Partner.

What's the matter, Petit-Nightmare? I wondered if it was mad because it thought I was stealing Partner away from it. They were inseparable most of the time. Unfortunately for it, my partner and I were *literally* inseparable.

We share the same body, so you really shouldn't be a “petty” nightmare about it! I stopped thinking about getting rid of her a long time ago.

Ignoring that, what was angering sweet Allo? Ever since she reanimated, all she knew was this dangerous forest. She had to deal with my partner, who was also kind of dangerous. Did she start thinking of me as a father figure along the way? Was she jealous of my partner in the same way the petit-nightmare was

jealous of me? Well, maybe the two situations were a little different.

Either way, Allo and the petit-nightmare continued silently seething.

That's kinda threatening... Can you not? Makes me self-conscious with such cold stares on me. I promise, nothing funny going on over here. You should learn from Treant. It's sleeping without a care in the world.

Speaking of sleep, I felt my eyes grow heavy. Gradually, I started to drift off, until I fell asleep for good.

"Graaar!"

The next morning, I woke to the sound of my partner's roar. I felt like I was falling, and then something whacked me on the side of the head. My head had rolled off of whatever it was on. I straightened and shook the dust off myself in a rush.

What happened, Partner? Is it another avyssos?!

My partner's face was covered in a sticky substance and dirt. The sticky substance was...drool? Why was it all over her face?

("You jerk! Not only did you use my face as your pillow, but you drooled on me!")

For real? No way! I did that?! Oh, um, I guess I fell asleep on your head...

("What do you mean, you fell asleep on my head? Wh-what did you do in my sleep last night?!")

N-nothing! I promise I didn't do anything! I hastily yanked my face away, but my partner sank her fangs into my neck. My tough Ouroboros scales were no match for her sharp Ouroboros fangs. Blue blood spurted out from the wound, splattering against the walls of the shrine. The pain made me woozy. Of course, that's when she attacked me and bit me again.

Knock it off! Seriously, knock it off or I'll die! Even though I'm an Ouroboros, so are you. If you keep attacking me like that, you're gonna kill me!

I twisted my neck, looking around the shrine for help. Allo and the petit-

nightmare watched over us from the back of the shrine with apparent amusement. For some reason, they exchanged relieved glances and nods.

I have no idea what's going on over there, but I'm in trouble here! H-hey! I'm actually losing a lot of blood!

Partner! Hi-Rest! Use Hi-Rest! Please use Hi-Rest on me! I'm sorry! Dammit, it's no use. She's too angry!

Treant! Rest! Use Rest on me! I promise I'll do whatever you want!

The treant stared at me from the entrance, not moving a branch. It turned into petrified wood at the thought of intervening in a squabble between two rank A monsters. Or one rank A monster with two heads, anyway.

Afterword

HELLO, this is the author, Necoco! Thanks so much for buying Volume 5 of *Dragon Hatchling*.

This volume is the beginning of the Lithovar Tribe arc. This one is a bit longer than usual, compared to the other books. There was talk of dividing the arc into three books: the Manticore battle, the battle against Mother, and the one that comes after this, which involves Tolemann. But every other arc so far has fit neatly into two volumes, so if I went with three, I'd have an entire volume of nothing but an avyssos battle. I thought that wouldn't be very good for my mental health. Fortunately, it went according to plan and ended up a two-volume arc.

Although, I was a bit curious as to what an avyssos battle taking up an entire volume would be like. Aren't you? The avyssos volume, with nothing but avyssos, cover to cover. The illustrations inside would be avyssos too. It might have been a light novel that went down in history, but I didn't have the guts to do it. Maybe that was a good thing.

To cut down on the length of the story, I had to remove a lot of descriptions and sentences while still maintaining each character's individuality. Luckily, I think I succeeded. The changes made this volume much richer than usual. Since it takes place over a large environment, there are a lot of characters. This also meant I received a ton of character design drafts from the illustrator. As an author, seeing the cover art and the illustration drafts is one of my favorite parts of the process, so I was excited about it.

Now, I have an unfortunate announcement for my readers. You know how they do that on TV? "Tom, I've got some good news and some bad news. Which one do you want to hear first?" That kind of thing. But unfortunately, I can't hear your answer in real time, so instead of pumping you up first only to let you down, I'll give you the bad news first.

So, the bad news is—and you may have guessed this already if you've been reading these notes at the end of my books—yes, my avocado tree died.

I said last time that the hardest thing for an avocado tree to weather was that first winter, but it got through the winter easily. I thought its time had come once we reached spring, so I was looking forward to transplanting it to a bigger pot and watching it grow. However, my living situation changed, and I had to leave my house and live somewhere else for a while. Unfortunately, I couldn't bring my avocado tree with me and gave it a tearful goodbye.

I asked my dad to please take care of the avocado tree for me, and then I moved to my new place. I came back home after a while and, in a cruel twist, found it dried up. I angrily said to my father, "What in the world happened?"

Apparently, he watered it every day, but it grew weaker and weaker until it died. I don't know if he was telling the truth or not, but the tree was small. Sometimes that just happens. Maybe I didn't repot it properly. It's hard to grow from seeds, so perhaps I should've bought an avocado tree to raise on my own. They're not that expensive.

Now for the good news! Honestly, who cares about the avocado tree? That was killing time before I reveal this huge announcement! Some of you may know this already, but the manga version of *Dragon Hatchling* is going to be serialized on Comic Earth Star's website starting September 2017! Yay! Amazing! Applause, please!

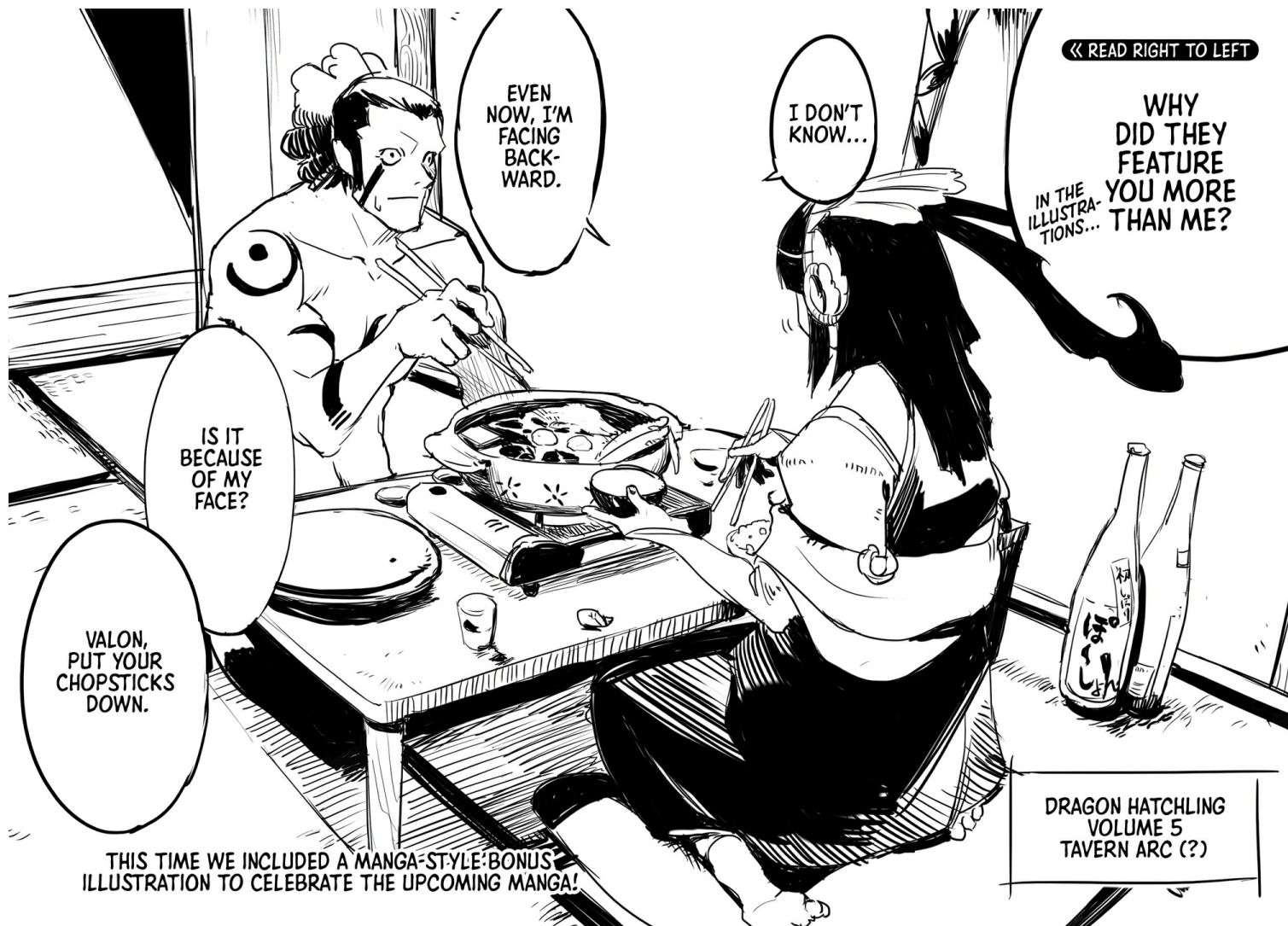
That means it'll be up and running by the time you have this book. Go over to your computer or smartphone and look it up now! If you don't have the internet for some reason, just wait for the hard copy!

When I was checking over the manga version, I thought that the baby dragon looked so very cute. I was thrilled and savored every page! Please, please go out and read it and savor it like I did! I'm already looking forward to seeing what Illusia will look like as both a Plague Dragon and an Ouroboros!

Thank you so much. I hope to have your continued support reading both the light novel and manga versions of *Dragon Hatchling*!

Crying over my dead avocado tree from my new house,

—NECOCO



« READ RIGHT TO LEFT »

EVEN
NOW, I'M
FACING
BACK-
WARD.

I DON'T
KNOW...

WHY
DID THEY
FEATURE
YOU MORE
IN THE
ILLUSTRA-
TIONS...
THAN ME?

IS IT
BECAUSE
OF MY
FACE?

VALON,
PUT YOUR
CHOPSTICKS
DOWN.

THIS TIME WE INCLUDED A MANGA-STYLE 'BONUS' ILLUSTRATION TO CELEBRATE THE UPCOMING MANGA!

DRAGON HATCHLING
VOLUME 5
TAVERN ARC (?)

YEAH!!

CONGRATS ON VOLUME 5!
HOW BIG WILL ILLUSIA GROW?
AS BIG AS A GORILLA?!

RIO-MANGA EDITOR
(SORRY FOR THE
INTERRUPTION...)





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WRITTEN BY
Necoco

ILLUSTRATED BY
NAJI Yanagida

NOVEL

5

REINCARNATED AS A
DRAGON
HATCHLING

